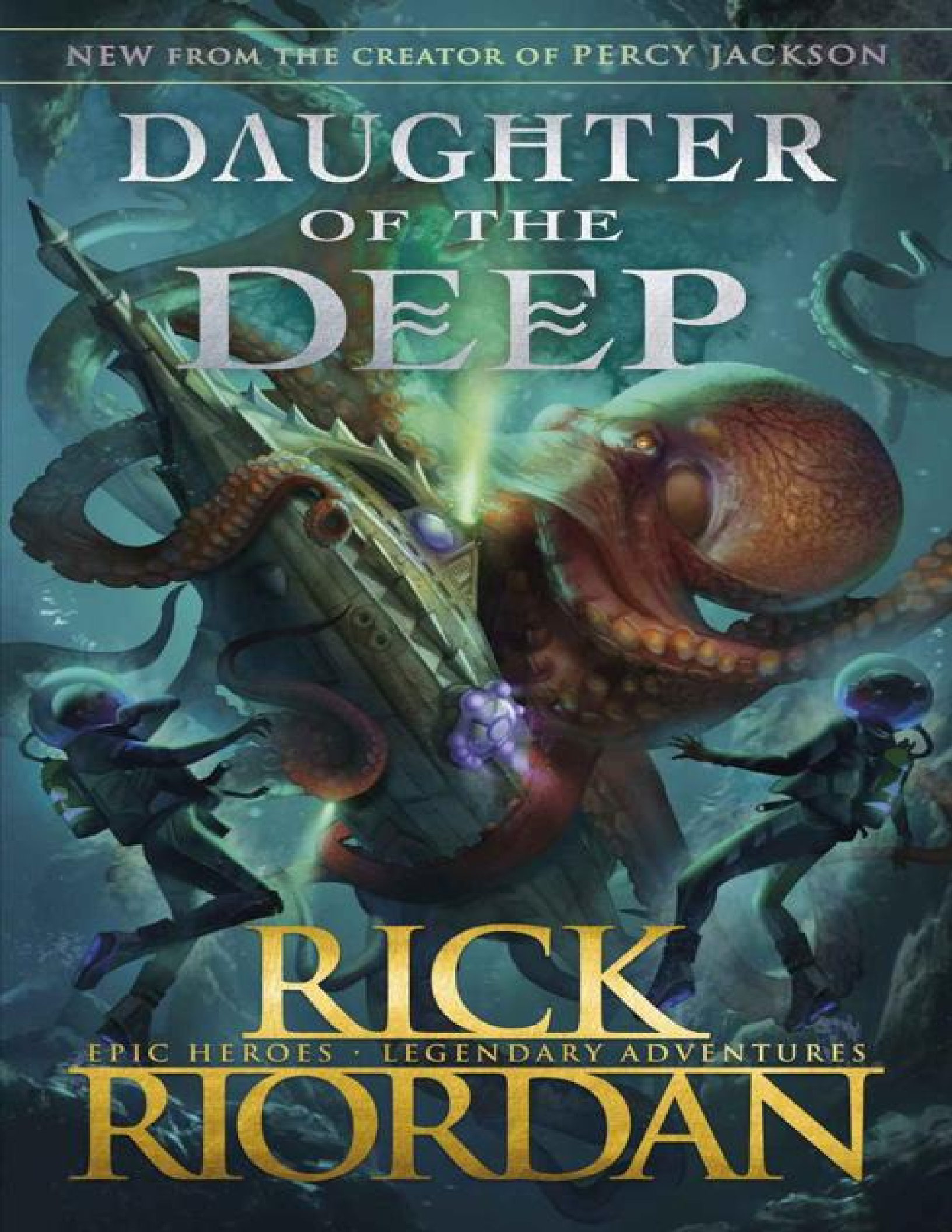
NEW FROM THE CREATOR OF PERCY JACKSON

DAUGHTER OF THE DEEP



RICK RIORDAN

EPIC HEROES · LEGENDARY ADVENTURES



DAUGHTER OF THE DEEP

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About the Author

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Rick lives in Boston with his wife, Becky, and their two sons, and whe
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To learn more about Rick and his books, you can visit him at
www.rickriordan.co.uk or follow him on Twitter @RickRiordan.

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Books by Rick Riordan

The Percy Jackson series

PERCY JACKSON AND THE LIGHTNING THIEF*
PERCY JACKSON AND THE SEA OF MONSTERS*
PERCY JACKSON AND THE TITAN'S CURSE*
PERCY JACKSON AND THE BATTLE OF THE LABYRINTH*
PERCY JACKSON AND THE LAST OLYMPIAN*

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PERCY JACKSON AND THE GREEK GODS
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9 FROM THE NINE WORLDS

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HARDING ~ PENCROFT


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Nature's creative power is far beyond man's instinct of destruction.

– Jules Verne, 20,000 Leagues Under the Sea



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Foreword

Don’t Pick Up a Starfish by Its Arm

Did you know more than eighty percent of the ocean remains unexplor
EIGHTY, PEOPLE! It is very possible that at this moment a mermaid
giant squid are munching on macroalgae macaroni and wondering whe
we’re going to catch up and discover that Atlantis was just a theme par
went terribly wrong. Who knows?

No one can say for certain, because so much of the ocean is unknow
I am terrified of the unknown, so it goes without saying that I am abso
terrified of the ocean. Perhaps it started when, at the age of ten, I picke
starfish by one of its arms … and soon found myself holding a single
wiggling appendage. At the time, I didn’t know that starfish arms coul
regenerate. I believed I was a murderer. I fell to my knees and bellowe
horror. (CURSE YE, FORMIDABLE MIGHT! SUCH INNOCENCE
DESTROYED! DOES THIS MEAN I CAN PERMANENTLY SKIP
GYM?)

But the more that something terrifies me, the more I tend to obsess c
And, ever since that fateful starfish encounter, the ocean, with its stran
inhabitants – that’s right, I’m looking at you, various *echinoderms* and
ophiuroids – has loomed large in my mind as a place of unknowable p
unimaginable beauty and untapped potential.

Rick Riordan’s *Daughter of the Deep* captures every single facet of
awe and terror.

If you have ever craved a story that will leave your heart racing, you
gasping from numerous twists and turns, your soul heaving from the e
carrying around an ensemble cast that includes smol, ingenious and po
bloodthirsty cinnamon rolls (oh, and a humongous creature of the deep
truly, just wants love), you will find all that and more in the pages ahea
story begins with two warring schools and a cataclysmic event that sen

freshman class of the elite Harding-Pencroft Academy on a deadly mis
unearth a secret about the kind of technological power that can remake
world. I was on the edge of my seat the whole time as the crew navigat
high-tech high jinks, deep-sea riddles and the sort of military tactics th
somehow make *me* feel smarter despite the fact that I have been ensco
a soft blankie for the better part of the day.

I cannot think of a better captain to helm this watery adventure than
formidable Ana Dakkar. Ana is everything I wished I could be at fiftee
Fearless, brilliant, a linguistic whiz, friends with a dolphin named Soc
and – most importantly to a daydreaming adolescent Rosh – burdened
an ancestral legacy that is the stuff of legends.

You see, Ana is one of the last descendants of Captain Nemo, and th
where things get complicated. As the last of the Dakkars, Ana not only
herself grappling with an inheritance that could change the entire worl
understanding of technology, but she's also struggling with larger ques
like *What are we owed?* and *What do we owe others?* It's easy to mak
right decisions when all the world is watching, but when you're deep
underwater, where the sun can't see you, you might just end up doing
something you never expected …

To me, this story is a lot like the ocean. Equal parts thrilling and terr
and, no matter which way you look at it, downright cool. Enjoy! And d
eat too many cinnamon rolls.

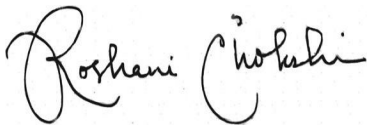


freshman class of the elite Harding-Pencroft Academy on a deadly mission to unearth a secret about the kind of technological power that can remake the world. I was on the edge of my seat the whole time as the crew navigated high-tech high jinks, deep-sea riddles and the sort of military tactics that somehow make *me* feel smarter despite the fact that I have been ensconced in a soft blankie for the better part of the day.

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You see, Ana is one of the last descendants of Captain Nemo, and that's where things get complicated. As the last of the Dakkars, Ana not only finds herself grappling with an inheritance that could change the entire world's understanding of technology, but she's also struggling with larger questions, like *What are we owed?* and *What do we owe others?* It's easy to make the right decisions when all the world is watching, but when you're deep underwater, where the sun can't see you, you might just end up doing something you never expected …

To me, this story is a lot like the ocean. Equal parts thrilling and terrifying, and, no matter which way you look at it, downright cool. Enjoy! And don't eat too many cinnamon rolls.



Introduction

My journey under the sea started in landlocked Bologna, Italy, in 2008 there for a children's book fair, right before *The Battle of the Labyrinth* *The 39 Clues: The Maze of Bones* were scheduled for release. I was ha dinner in the basement of a restaurant with about fourteen of the top bı from Disney Publishing when the president of the division turned to m said, 'Rick, is there any existing Disney intellectual property you'd lov write about?' I didn't hesitate in saying, '*20,000 Leagues Under the Se* took me another twelve years before I was ready to write it, but my ver that story is now in your hands.



Who is Captain Nemo? (No, not the cartoon fish.)
If you're not familiar with the original Captain Nemo, he's a character created by the French author Jules Verne in the nineteenth century. Ve wrote about him in two novels, *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* (1870) *The Mysterious Island* (1875), in which Nemo commands the world's advanced submarine, the *Nautilus*.

Captain Nemo was smart, well educated, courteous and massively w He was also angry, bitter and dangerous. Imagine a combination of Brı Wayne, Tony Stark and Lex Luthor. Formerly known as Prince Dakka Nemo had fought the British colonial government in India. In retaliatic British killed his wife and children. This was Dakkar's supervillain/sup origin story. He renamed himself Nemo, which is Latin for *no one*. (Gı myth fans: this was an Easter egg about/shout-out to Odysseus, who to Cyclops Polyphemus that his name was Nobody.) Nemo dedicated the his life to terrorizing the colonial European powers on the high seas, si and plundering their ships and making them fear the unstoppable 'sea monster' that was the *Nautilus*.

Who wouldn't want to have that kind of power? As a kid, every tim jumped in a lake or even a swimming pool, I liked to pretend I was Ca Nemo. I could sink enemy ships with impunity, go all over the world undetected, explore depths no one had ever visited, and uncover fabulc ruins and priceless treasures. I could submerge into my own secret real never return to the surface world (which was kind of horrible anyway). I eventually wrote about Percy Jackson, the son of Poseidon, you can b my old daydreams about Captain Nemo and the *Nautilus* were a big re chose to make Percy a demigod of the sea.

Now, I'll be honest, I found Verne's novels slow going when I was But I *did* enjoy my uncle's old Classics Illustrated editions, and I lovec watching the Disney film version of *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* – e the cheesy bits like Kirk Douglas dancing and singing, and the giant ru squid attacking the ship. Only when I was older did I realize how rich complex the original stories were. Nemo was even more interesting tha had imagined. And I began to see little openings in the narrative where had left room for a possible sequel …

Why does Captain Nemo still matter?

Verne was one of the first writers of science fiction. Looking back fror twenty-first century, it can be difficult for us to appreciate just how revolutionary his ideas were, but Verne imagined technology that wou exist for hundreds of years to come. A self-powered submarine that co circle the globe continuously and never have to dock for supplies? Impossible! In 1870, submarines were still newfangled inventions – dangerous tin cans that were more likely to blow up and kill everyone board than to complete a trip around the world. Verne also wrote *Arou World in 80 Days* at a time when making the trip that quickly was unthinkable, and *Journey to the Centre of the Earth*, a feat that is still f beyond human technology, though some day, who knows?

The best science fiction can shape how humans see their own future Verne did that better than anyone. Way back in the 1800s, he suggeste *could* be possible, and humans rose to the challenge. When people talk how fast a plane or a ship can circle the world, they still use *Around th World in 80 Days* as a benchmark. At one time, eighty days was an inc

short trip for circumnavigating the globe. Now we can do it in less tha
eighty hours by plane, and less than forty days by sea.

Verne's *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* inspired generations of c
to explore the earth's cave systems and spurred geoengineers to figure
how the layers of the earth function.

Captain Nemo, on the other hand, raised awareness of the importanc
oceans would have for the future of the planet. We know most of the e
covered with water, and eighty percent of the oceans are *still* unexplor
Figuring out how to tap the power of the sea, and to live *with* the powe
the sea as our climate changes, may be key to human survival. Verne
envisioned all of that in his books.

Nemo and his crew are able to live self-sufficiently without ever tou
dry land. The sea provides all their needs. In *20,000 Leagues*, Nemo te
Aronnax that the *Nautilus* is entirely electric and draws all its power fr
ocean. In *The Mysterious Island*, Cyrus Harding speculates that when
runs out, humans will learn to draw energy from the abundant hydroge
the ocean. That is *still* a goal people are trying to achieve today, and o
the reasons I decided that Nemo must have unlocked the secret of cold
fusion.

In *20,000 Leagues*, Nemo's crew uses electrical Leyden guns that a
effective and elegant than standard arms. They have almost limitless w
thanks to the many shipwrecks they've plundered. They've discovered
secrets of subaquatic agriculture, so food is never an issue. Most impo
they have *freedom*. They are independent of any nation's laws and can
and go as they please. They answer to no one except Nemo. Whether t
good or bad … I guess that depends on what you think of Nemo!

The importance of the sea, the importance of imagining new technol
advances – these are great reasons to still read Jules Verne. But there's
more critical thing to consider. Verne made Captain Nemo an Indian p
whose people suffered under European colonialism. His character expl
themes that are just as critical now as they were in Victorian times. Ho
you find a voice and power when society denies you those privileges?
do you fight injustice? Who gets to write the history books and decide
were the 'good guys' and the 'bad guys'? Nemo is an outlaw, a rebel, a
genius, a scientist, an explorer, a pirate, a gentleman, an 'archangel of
vengeance'. He's a complicated guy, which makes him a lot of fun to
about. I was fascinated by the idea of fast-forwarding his legacy into th

twenty-first century and looking at what his descendants would be dea with all these years later.

What would *you* do if you had the power of the *Nautilus* at your command? I hope *Daughter of the Deep* will inspire you to think abou own adventures, the way Jules Verne inspired me. Make ready to dive. going deep!



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What would *you* do if you had the power of the *Nautilus* at your command? I hope *Daughter of the Deep* will inspire you to think about your own adventures, the way Jules Verne inspired me. Make ready to dive. We're going deep!





HARDING-PENCROFT ACADEMY

HOUSE DOLPHIN
communications, exploration, cryptography, counter-intelligence

HOUSE SHARK
command, combat, weapons systems, logistics

HOUSE CEPHALOPOD
engineering, applied mechanics, innovation, defensive systems

HOUSE ORCA
medicine, psychology, education, marine biology, communal memory



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HOUSE DO
Ana Dakkar,
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prefect
nn Best
Esparza
Nasser
ack Wu

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prefect
ardenas
Dunne
Jensen
cManus

OPOD
prefect
bie Barr
la Silva
ewman
Ramsay

ORCA
prefect
Harding
Huang
Morrow
d Salter



CHAPTER ONE

Here's the thing about life-shattering days.

They start just like any other. You don't realize your world is about explode into a million smoking pieces of awfulness until it's too late.

The last Friday of my freshman year, I wake in my dorm room at fiv as usual. I get up quietly so as not to disturb my room-mates, change ir bikini and head for the ocean.

I love the campus in the early morning. The white concrete facades buildings are turning pink and turquoise in the sunrise. The quad's gras lawn is empty except for seagulls and squirrels waging their eternal wa the snack crumbs we students have left behind. The air smells of sea sa eucalyptus and fresh cinnamon rolls baking in the cafeteria. The cool Southern California breeze raises goosebumps on my arms and legs. It times like this I can't believe I'm lucky enough to go to school at Hard Pencroft Academy.

Assuming I survive this weekend's trials, of course. I might wash ou disgrace, or die tangled in a net at the bottom of some underwater obst course … But, hey, it's still better than ending the term doing five jillio multiple-choice problems on some state standardized test.

I follow the gravel footpath that leads to the ocean.

A hundred yards past the naval-warfare building, the cliffs drop into Pacific. Far below, white surf ribs the steel-blue sea. Waves rumble an reverberate around the curve of the bay like the snores of a giant.

My brother, Dev, is waiting for me at the edge of the cliff. 'You're l Ana Banana.'

He knows I hate it when he calls me that.

‘I *will* push you off,’ I warn.

‘Well, you could try.’ When Dev grins, he does this lopsided squint, he can’t equalize the pressure in one ear. The other girls tell me it’s ad I’m not convinced. His dark hair is spiky in front, like a sea urchin. He it’s his ‘style’. I think it’s just because he sleeps with a pillow over his

As usual, he’s wearing his standard black HP wetsuit with the silver logo on the front, indicating his house. Dev thinks I’m crazy to make t in a bikini. In most ways, he’s a tough guy. When it comes to cold temperatures, though, he’s kind of a baby.

We do our pre-dive stretches. This spot is one of the few places alor California coast where you can free dive without getting smashed to pi against the rocks below. The cliffs are sheer, plunging straight into the of the bay.

It’s quiet and peaceful this time of morning. Despite Dev’s responsi as a house captain, he is never too busy for our morning ritual. I love h that.

‘What did you bring for Socrates today?’ I ask.

Dev gestures nearby. Two dead squid lie glistening in the grass. As senior, Dev has access to the aquarium’s feeding supplies. This means sneak little treats for our friend under the bay. The squid are about a fo from tail to tentacles – slimy, silver and brown like oxidized aluminiur *Loligo opalescens*. California market squid. Lifespan six to nine mont

I can’t turn off the data stream. Our marine biology professor, Dr Fa has trained us too well. You learn to remember the details because everything, literally *everything*, will be on her quizzes.

Socrates has another name for *Loligo opalescens*. He calls them bre

‘Nice.’ I pick up the squid, still cold from the freezer, and hand one ‘You ready?’

‘Hey, before we dive …’ His expression turns serious. ‘I have some want to give you …’

I don’t know if he’s telling the truth or not, but I always fall for his distractions. As soon as he has my attention, he turns and jumps off the

I curse. ‘Oh, you little –’

Whoever jumps in first has a better chance of finding Socrates first.

I take a deep breath and leap after him.

Cliff-diving is the ultimate rush. I free-fall ten stories, wind and adr screaming in my ears, then punch through the icy water.

I relish the shock to my system: the sudden cold, the sting of the bri
, like my cuts and scrapes. (If you don't have cuts and scrapes as a student a
orable. you haven't been doing your combat exercises right.)
: claims I plunge straight through a school of copper rockfish – dozens of fri
face. orange-and-white bruisers who look like punk-rock koi. But their toug
Shark are just for show, since they scatter with a massive burst of YIKES! Te
he dive metres below me, I spot the shimmering whirlwind of Dev's bubble tra
follow it down.

My static apnoea record is five minutes. Obviously, I can't hold my
ıg the that long when I'm exerting myself, but still, this is my environment. C
.eces surface, Dev has the advantage of strength and speed. Underwater, I've
depths the endurance and agility. At least, that's what I tell myself.

My brother floats above the sandy seabed, his legs crossed like he's
bilities meditating there for hours. He's keeping the squid behind his back, be
ıim for Socrates has arrived and is nuzzling Dev's chest as if to say, *C'mon, I*
what you've got for me.

Socrates is a gorgeous animal. And I don't say that just because my
a is Dolphin. He's a young male bottlenose, nine feet long, with bluish-g
he can skin and a prominent dark streak across his dorsal fin. I know he isn't
ot long *actually* smiling. His long-beaked mouth is just shaped that way. Still,
n. it unbelievably cute.
ıs. Dev produces his squid. Socrates snaps it up and swallows it whole.
ırez, grins at me, a bubble escaping from his lips. His expression says *Ha-h*
dolphin likes me best.

I offer Socrates my squid. He's only too happy to have seconds. He
akfast. scratch his head, which is as smooth and taut as a water balloon, then r
to Dev. pectoral fins. (Dolphins are suckers for pectoral-fin rubs.)

Then he does something I'm not expecting. He bucks, pushing my h
thing I with his rostrum in a gesture I've come to read as *Let's go!* or *Hurry!* I
veers and swims off, the wake from his tail buffeting my face.

I watch until he disappears into the gloom. I wait for him to circle b
e cliff. doesn't.

I don't understand.

Usually he doesn't eat and run. He likes to hang out. Dolphins are n
social. Most days, he'll follow us to the surface and leap over our head
enalin play hide-and-seek, or pepper us with squeaks and clicks that sound lik

questions. That's why we call him Socrates. He never gives answers – asks questions.

But today he seemed agitated … almost worried.

At the edge of my vision, the blue lights of the security grid stretch a the mouth of the bay – a glowing diamond pattern I've grown used to c the last two years. As I watch, the lights wink out, then flicker back on never seen them do that before.

I glance at Dev. He doesn't appear to have noticed the change in the He points up. *Race you.*

He kicks for the surface, leaving me in a cloud of sand.

I want to stay under longer. I'm curious to see if the lights go out ag if Socrates comes back. But my lungs are burning. Reluctantly, I follov

After I join him on the surface and catch my breath, I ask if he saw t flicker off.

He squints at me. 'Are you sure you weren't just blacking out?'

I splash his face. 'I'm serious. We should tell somebody.'

Dev wipes the water from his eyes. He still looks sceptical.

To be honest, I've never understood why we have a state-of-the-art electronic underwater barrier across the mouth of the bay. I know it's supposed to keep the sea life safe by keeping out everything else, like poachers, recreational divers and pranksters from our rival high school Institute. But it seems like overkill, even for a school that produces the world's best marine scientists and naval cadets. I don't know exactly h grid works. I *do* know it isn't supposed to flicker, though.

Dev must see that I'm genuinely worried. 'Fine,' he says. 'I'll repor

'Also, Socrates was acting weird.'

'A dolphin acting weird. Okay, I'll report that, too.'

'I could do it, but, like you always say, I'm just a lowly freshman. Y the big, powerful house captain of the Sharks, so –'

He splashes me back. 'If you're done being paranoid, I really *do* hav something for you.' He pulls a glittering chain from the pouch of his d belt. 'Happy early birthday, Ana.'

He hands me the necklace: a single black pearl set in gold. It takes n second to understand what he's given me. My chest tightens.

'Mom's?' I can barely say the word.

The pearl was the centrepiece of Mom's mangalsutra, her wedding necklace. It's also the only thing we have left of her.

Dev smiles, though his eyes get that familiar melancholy drift. ‘I got pearl reset. You’ll be fifteen next week. She’d want you to wear it.’

This is the sweetest thing he’s ever done for me. I’m going to start weeping. ‘But … why not wait until next week?’

‘You’re leaving for your freshman trials today. I wanted you to have pearl for luck – just in case, you know, you fail spectacularly or someth

He really knows how to ruin a moment.

‘Oh, shut up,’ I say.

He laughs. ‘I’m kidding, of course. You’re going to do great. You al do great, Ana. Just be careful, okay?’

I feel myself flush. I’m not sure what to do with all this warmth and affection. ‘Well … the necklace is beautiful. Thank you.’

‘’Course.’ He stares at the horizon, a flicker of worry in his dark bro eyes. Maybe he’s thinking about the security grid, or he really *is* nervo about my weekend trials. Or maybe he’s thinking about what happened years ago, when our parents flew over that horizon for the last time.

‘Come on.’ He musters another reassuring smile, as he has done so o for my sake. ‘We’ll be late for breakfast.’

Always hungry, my brother, and always moving – the perfect Shark captain.

He swims for shore.

I look at my mother’s black pearl – her talisman that was supposed t long life and protection from evil. Unfortunately for her and my father neither. I scan the horizon, wondering where Socrates has gone, and w was trying to tell me.

Then I swim after my brother, because suddenly I don’t want to be a the water.

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‘Oh, shut up,’ I say.

He laughs. ‘I’m kidding, of course. You’re going to do great. You always do great, Ana. Just be careful, okay?’

I feel myself flush. I’m not sure what to do with all this warmth and affection. ‘Well … the necklace is beautiful. Thank you.’

‘’Course.’ He stares at the horizon, a flicker of worry in his dark brown eyes. Maybe he’s thinking about the security grid, or he really *is* nervous about my weekend trials. Or maybe he’s thinking about what happened two years ago, when our parents flew over that horizon for the last time.

‘Come on.’ He musters another reassuring smile, as he has done so often for my sake. ‘We’ll be late for breakfast.’

Always hungry, my brother, and always moving – the perfect Shark captain.

He swims for shore.

I look at my mother’s black pearl – her talisman that was supposed to bring long life and protection from evil. Unfortunately for her and my father, it did neither. I scan the horizon, wondering where Socrates has gone, and what he was trying to tell me.

Then I swim after my brother, because suddenly I don’t want to be alone in the water.



CHAPTER TWO

In the cafeteria, I wolf down a plate of tofu-nori scramble – delicious a
usual. Then I rush to the dorms to grab my go bag.

We freshmen live on the first floor of Shackleton Hall, above the eig
graders. Our rooms aren't as spacious as the sophomore and junior dig
Cousteau Hall. And they're *definitely* not as nice as the senior suites in
He, but they're light-years better than the cramped barracks we shared
eighth-graders during our 'chum year' at HP.

I suppose I should get this out of the way. Harding-Pencroft is a five
high school. We're divided into four houses, based on the results of ou
aptitude tests. We call the academy HP for short. And, yes, we've hear
the Harry Potter jokes. Thanks anyway.

When I get to my room, my room-mates are freaking out.

Nelinha is stuffing tools, extra outfits and cosmetics into her pack. E
frantically sorting index cards. She has, like, twelve stacks, all colour c
labelled and highlighted. Her dog, Top, barks and jumps up and down
furry pogo stick.

It's the usual pandemonium, but I can't help but smile. I love my cre
Thankfully, rooms aren't assigned by house, or I would never feel like
could be off duty and relax with my besties.

'Babe, don't overpack,' Nelinha tells Ester, while stuffing more soc
wrenches and mascara into her own bag. (Nelinha calls everybody *bab*
just her thing.)

'I *need* my index cards,' Ester says. 'And treats for Top.'

Yap! Top barks in agreement, trying his best to touch his nose to the ceiling.

Nelinha shrugs at me. *What can you do?*

She's rocking a sort of Rosie the Riveter look today. Her lush brown tied back in a green bandanna. The tails of her short-sleeved denim wo are knotted over her dark midriff. Her calf-length khakis are permanen stained with machine grease, but her make-up, as usual, is perfect. I sw Nelinha could be crawling through the aquarium's pump system or fix boat engine and she'd *still* manage to look fashionable.

Her eyes widen when she sees the black pearl at the base of my thro 'Pretty! Where'd *that* come from?'

'Early birthday present from Dev,' I say. 'It, uh … belonged to our

Her lips form an O. My room-mates have heard all the tragic stories my family. Between Nelinha, Ester and me, our dorm room is one of t world's largest producers of tragic stories.

'Well,' she says, 'I've got the perfect skirt and blouse to go with tha

Nelinha's great for sharing clothes and make-up. We're more or less same size, and we have the same skin tone – she's Brasileira parda; my ancestry is Bundeli Indian – so she can usually fix me up nicely for a s dance or a Saturday furlough in town. But today is not that kind of day

'Nelinha, we're going to be living on a boat for the weekend,' I rem her.

'I know, I know,' says the girl who's made herself up just for the bu to the boat. 'But when we get back. Maybe for the end-of-year party!'

Ester stuffs one last bag of dog biscuits into her duffel bag.

'OKAY,' she announces. She turns in a circle, examining the room if she's forgotten anything. She's wearing her blue HOUSE ORCA T-shirt flower-patterned shorts over a one-piece swimsuit. Her face is flushed. frizzy blond hair has been blown in three different directions. I've seen pictures of her as a baby: pinchable plump cheeks, wide blue eyes, a st expression, like *What am I doing in this universe?* She hasn't really ch much.

'I'M READY!' she decides.

'Volume, babe,' Nelinha says.

'Sorry,' Ester says. 'Let's go! We'll miss the bus!'

Ester hates being late. It's one of the anxieties Top is supposed to he manage. How Top could make anybody feel *less* anxious, I've never

understood, but he's the cutest emotional-support animal you'll ever m
Part Jack Russell, part Yorkie, part tornado.

He sniffs my hand as he follows Ester out. Maybe I didn't clean all t
squid juice from under my fingernails.

I grab the go bag I packed last night. I'm not taking much: change o
clothes. Wetsuit. Dive knife. Dive watch. None of us knows what the
weekend trials will be like. They'll be mostly underwater (duh), but th
upperclassmen won't tell us anything specific. Even Dev. They take th
vows of secrecy *very* seriously. It's annoying.

I rush to catch up with my friends.

To get to the quad, we have to go downstairs and pass through the e
grade wing. For a long time, I thought this was an annoying interior-de
flaw. Then I realized the dorms must have been arranged like this on p
It means the chum have to get out of our way several times a day, look
us freshmen with expressions of fear and awe. For our part, every time
pass through, we can think *As lowly as we are, at least we're not* these
schmucks. They all seem so small, young and frightened. I wonder if w
looked like that last year. Maybe we *still* look like that to the upperclas
I imagine Dev laughing.

Outside, the beautiful day is heating up. As we hurry across campus
think about all the classes I'll be missing because of our trip.

The gymnasium: six climbing walls; two rope courses; hot and cold
rooms; courts for basketball, racquetball, volleyball and bungee ball (n
favourite). But Fridays are for martial arts. I'd be spending my mornin
getting thrown into a wall during malaa yuddha matches. I can't say I'
that.

The aquarium: the largest private research facility in the world, I'm
with a better variety of marine life than Monterey Bay, Chimelong or A
We operate rescue-and-rehabilitation units for leatherback turtles, otte
sea lions (all of whom are my precious babies), but today would be my
scrub the eel tanks, so see ya!

The natatorium: three swimming pools, including the Blue Hole, big
deep enough to run submarine simulations. The only larger swimming
the world is at NASA. As much as I love my indoor dive classes, I'll ta
open ocean any day.

Finally we pass Verne Hall, the 'gold-level' research wing. What go
in there, I have no idea. We won't be allowed entry until we're juniors

Verne's gilded metal facade stands out among the campus's white buil like a gold-crowned tooth. Its dark glass doors always seem to taunt m *you were cool enough, like your brother, you might be able to come in HA-HA-HA-HA.*

You'd think out of forty upperclassmen, *somebody* would be willing drop a little juicy gossip about gold-level classes, but nope. Like I said commitment to secrecy is absolute and annoying. Honestly, I don't kn I'll be able to stay so tight-lipped if I get to be an upperclassman, but t problem for another year.

In the main quad, seniors are lazing on the grass. They're all done n except for finals and graduation, the lucky bums. Then they're off to t universities and promising careers. I don't see Dev, but his girlfriend, Leahy, my house captain, gives me a wave from across the lawn. She s *Good luck.*

I sign back, *Thanks.*

I tell myself, *I'll need it.*

I shouldn't be too worried. Our class is already down to twenty peop the max number allowed to advance. We lost ten students during our c year. Another four so far this year. Theoretically, the rest of us could a survive the cut. Also, my family has attended HP for generations. And the freshman prefect for House Dolphin. I'd have to screw up really ba get kicked out …

Ester, Nelinha and I are almost the first ones to the bus. But, of cour Gemini Twain has got there before us. He's standing at the door with h clipboard, ready to take names and kick whatever needs kicking.

The Shark prefect is tall, dark and lanky. Behind his back, everybod him Spider-Man, because he looks like Miles Morales from *Into the Sp Verse*. He's not nearly that cool, though. We've come to a truce since l year, but I still don't like him.

'Nelinha da Silva.' He checks off her name but won't meet her eyes Harding. Prefect Ana Dakkar. Welcome aboard.'

He says this like our shuttle bus is a battleship.

I give him a little bow. 'Thank you, Prefect.'

His eye twitches. Everything I do seems to bother him. That's okay me. During our chum year, the guy made Nelinha cry. I will never forg him for that.

Bernie is our driver today. He's a nice old dude, retired navy. He's g coffee-stained smile, silver hair and gnarled hands like tree roots.

Dr Hewett sits next to him, going over the day's schedule. As usual, Hewett is pallid, sweaty and dishevelled. He smells like mothballs. He teaches my least-favourite class, Theoretical Marine Science, or TMS. of us call it 'too much stuff'. Sometimes we use a different word that b with *s*.

Hewett is really strict, so this doesn't bode well for the trials. My fri and I sit at the back of the bus, as far away from him as possible.

As soon as all twenty freshmen are on board, the bus gets underway

At the main gate, the heavily armed paramilitary dudes wave and sm we leave, like, *Have a nice day, kids! Don't die!* I guess most high sch don't have this level of security or the fleet of tiny surveillance drones constantly circle the campus. It's weird how quickly you get used to it, though.

As we turn onto Highway 1, I look back at campus – a dazzling coll of sugar-cube buildings perched on the clifftop above the bay.

A familiar feeling washes over me: *I can't believe I go to school her* Then I remember I have no *choice* but to go to school here. After what happened to our parents, it's the only home Dev and I have in the worl

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Still, I clutch the black pearl at the base of my throat.

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CHAPTER THREE

‘Freshmen.’ Dr Hewett says the word like an insult.

He stands in the aisle, bracing himself with one hand on the seatbacl breathes heavily into the bus’s microphone. ‘This weekend’s trials wil very different from what you might be expecting.’

This gets our attention. Everybody fixes their eyes on Hewett.

The professor is shaped like a diving bell – narrow shoulders taperir down to a wide waist, where his rumpled dress shirt is half untucked fr slacks. His frazzled grey hair and sad, watery eyes make him look like Einstein after a night of running failed calculations.

Next to me, Ester shuffles through her index cards. Top rests his hea her lap. His tail thumps softly against my thigh.

‘In thirty minutes,’ Hewett continues, ‘we will arrive in San Alejanc

He waits for our whispering to die down. We associate San Alejandr shopping, movies and Saturday-night karaoke, not end-of-year trials. E suppose it makes sense we would start there. The school’s boat is usua moored in the harbour.

‘We will proceed directly to the docks,’ Hewett continues. ‘No deto side trips to buy refreshments. You will keep your phones *off*.’

A few kids grumble. Harding-Pencroft strictly controls all communi through the school intranet. The campus is a cellular dead zone. You w look up the breeding habits of jellyfish? No problem. You want to wat YouTube? Good luck with that.

The teachers say this is to keep us focused on our work. I suspect it’ another security precaution, like the underwater grid, or the armed gua the drone surveillance. I don’t understand it, but it’s a fact of life.

Typically, when we get into town, we're like dehydrated cattle at a watering hole. We stampede to the first place with free Wi-Fi and drin

'I will have further instructions once we're at sea,' Hewett says. 'Su say, today you'll find out what the academy is truly about. And the aca will find out whether you can survive its requirements.'

I want to think Hewett is just trying to scare us. The problem is, he r makes idle threats. If he says we'll have extra weekend homework, we he predicts ninety percent of us will fail his next exam, we do.

Theoretical Marine Science *should* be a fun fluff class. We spend m our time contemplating what ocean technology might look like in one hundred years. Or if science had taken a different course, what might h happened? What if Leonardo da Vinci had done more to develop sonar he discovered it in 1490? What if the plans for Drebbel's 'diving boat' been lost in the 1600s, or if Monturiol's anaerobic steam-powered subr hadn't been scrapped for lack of funding in 1867? Would our technolo today be more advanced?

It's cool stuff to think about, but also … not so practical? Hewett ac his questions have right answers. Like, it's *theoretical*. How can you g somebody a B minus on their essay just because their guess is differen yours?

Anyway, I wish Colonel Apesh, our military-tactics professor, were chaperoning this trip. Or Dr Kind, our physical-fitness teacher. Hewett barely shuffle a few feet without getting winded. I don't see how he's to judge what I imagine will be intensely physical underwater trials.

He turns over the microphone to Gemini Twain. Gem has made our assignments for the weekend. We'll be divided into five teams of four, member from each house. But first he has a few rules to tell us about.

Of course he does. He is *such* a Shark. You could put him in charge toddler soccer team and he'd get delusions of grandeur. He'd have the marching in perfect unison within a week. Then he'd declare war on a neighbouring toddler team.

He rattles off a list of his favourite regulations. My attention wande look out of the window.

The highway winds from switchback to switchback, hugging the cli One moment, you can't see anything but trees. The next, you can trace entire coastline all the way back to HP. When the school is in full view something strange in the bay. A thin line of wake heads towards the ba

the cliffs, just where Dev and I were diving this morning. I can't see w
making it. There's no boat. It's moving too fast and too straight to be a
animal. Something underwater, under propulsion.

The pit of my stomach feels like I'm free-falling again.

The wake line splits into three segments. It looks like a trident, its pr
racing to jab the coastline beneath the school.

'Hey!' I tell my friends. 'Hey, look!'

By the time Ester and Nelinha get to the window, the view has disap
behind trees and cliffs.

'What was it?' Nelinha asks.

Then the shock wave hits us. The bus shudders. Boulders topple into
road.

'Earthquake!' Gem drops the mic, literally, grabbing the nearest sea
to steady himself. Dr Hewett is thrown hard against the window.

Cracks splinter the asphalt as we skid towards the guardrail. All twe
us, well-trained freshmen, scream like kindergarteners.

Somehow, Bernie regains control of the bus.

He slows, looking for a place to pull over. We round another bend, a
comes into view, except now …

Ester screams, which starts Top whimpering in her lap. Nelinha pres
hands against the glass. 'No. No way. No.'

I yell, 'Bernie, stop! Stop here!'

Bernie pulls into one of the scenic overlooks where tourists can snap
pictures of the Pacific. The view is clear all the way back to HP, but th
nothing scenic about it now.

Kids are crying. Their faces press against the windows. My insides t
with disbelief.

A second shock wave hits us. We watch in horror as another massiv
wedge of earth calves into the bay, taking the last of those beautiful su
cubes with it.

I shove my way down the aisle. I hammer on the doors until Bernie
them. I run to the edge of the cliff and grip the cold steel guardrail.

I find myself mumbling desperate prayers. 'Three-Eyed One, Lord S
who nourishes all beings, may He liberate us from death …'

But there is no liberation.

My brother was on that campus. So were 150 other people and an
aquarium full of marine animals. A square mile of the California coast

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CHAPTER FOUR

Some of my classmates stand at the guardrail and cry. Others hug one another. Others desperately search for a phone signal, trying to text fri call for help. Eloise McManus howls and throws rocks at the ocean. C Dunne paces like a captive lion, kicking the bus's front tyres, then the ones.

Mascara traces down Nelinha's cheeks like dirty rain. She stands protectively over Ester, who sits cross-legged on the gravel, sobbing ir Top's brown-and-white fur.

Gemini Twain says what we're all thinking: 'This is impossible.'

He waves his arms, pointing to where our school used to be. '*Impos*

I'm not really present. I'm floating about six inches above my body. feel my heart hammering in my chest, but it's a dull, distant beat, like coming from a stereo system in the dorm room below mine. My emoti wrapped in gauze. My vision flickers around the edges.

I realize I'm dissociating. I've talked with the school counsellor, Dr Francis, about this. It's happened before, when I got the news about m parents. Now Dev is gone. Dr Francis is gone. My house captain, Ame Farez. Colonel Apesh. Dr Kind. The baby otters I nursed just yesterda aquarium. The nice cafeteria lady, Saanvi, who always smiled at me ar sometimes made coconut-filled gujiya pastries almost as good as my m Everyone at HP … This can't be happening.

I try to control my breathing. I try to anchor myself in my body, but like I'm going to drift away and evaporate.

Dr Hewett lumbers off the bus. He mops his face with a handkerchie
Bernie follows, lugging a big black supply case. The two men have a h
conversation.

I read Hewett's lips. I can't help it. I'm a Dolphin. My training is all
communication. Gathering intelligence. Codebreaking. I make out the
land and *attack.*

Bernie responds: *Inside help.*

I must have misread. Hewett couldn't have meant Land Institute. Ou
schools have been rivals forever, but this isn't some prank like them eg
our yacht or us stealing their great white shark. This is annihilation. An
did Bernie mean by *inside help*?

I breathe. I gather my shock and compress it into my diaphragm, the
do with oxygen before a free dive.

'I saw the attack,' I say.

Everybody is too distracted to hear me.

I say it again, louder. 'I SAW THE ATTACK.'

The group falls silent. Dr Hewett peers at me.

Gem stops pacing, and I don't like the way he's glaring at me. He cl
his fists. 'What do you mean *attack*?'

'It was some kind of torpedo,' I say. 'At least, I think it was.'

I describe the wake line I saw heading towards the cliffs, the way it
into three parts just before impact.

'Can't be,' says Kiya Jensen, another Shark. 'The grid was up. Anyt
coming through would've been neutralized.'

My legs tremble. 'This morning, Dev and I …'

Grief bubbles up in my throat, threatening to choke me.

Oh, god, Dev. His lopsided, squinty grin. His rascally brown eyes. H
ridiculous pillow-flattened hair. Seeing him every day, I could hold on
memory of what our father looked like. I could tell myself that our par
weren't completely gone. But now …

Everyone is staring at me. They're waiting, desperate for understanc
force myself to continue. I describe the strange flicker I saw in the ligh
the grid.

'Dev was going to report it,' I say. 'He was probably in the security
right when …'

I gesture north. I don't make myself look again, but I can feel the ga
hole in the landscape where Harding-Pencroft used to be. It's like a du

in my jaw where a tooth has been pulled.

'One torpedo?' Tia Romero, the House Cephalopod prefect, shakes head. 'Even with multiple warheads, there's no way a single missile co that kind of damage. To trigger a landslide of that magnitude …'

She looks at her Cephalopod housemates. They start whispering am themselves. Cephalopods are problem-solvers. It's what they do, like r reading lips. Dump a box of Legos in front of them, tell them to constr working supercomputer out of the pieces, and they won't rest until the figured out a way. Only Nelinha stands apart, keeping silent watch ove Ester.

'It doesn't matter *how* it happened,' Gem decides. 'We need to go b and search for survivors.'

'Agreed,' I say.

On any other day, this would be headline news. Gem and I haven't a on anything since we started at HP almost two years ago.

He nods grimly. 'Everybody, back on the –'

'No.' Dr Hewett hobbles forward, cradling his tablet computer in on Sweat patches have soaked through his shirt. His complexion is the co frozen custard.

Behind him, Bernie kneels and opens the supply case. Inside, nested foam, are a dozen silver drones the size of hummingbirds.

Hewett taps the screen of his control pad. The drones buzz to life. T rise from their foam cradles, gather overhead in a swarm of blue lights tiny propellers, then zip along the coastline, heading towards HP.

'The drones will run surveillance.' Hewett's voice shakes with ange grief, or both. 'But I warn you not to expect survivors. Land Institute h launched a pre-emptive strike. They mean to eliminate us. I have been an attack like this for two years.'

I touch the black pearl at my throat.

Why is Hewett talking about LI and HP as if they're sovereign natio Land Institute couldn't just destroy a chunk of the California coastline *kill* over a hundred people.

Top's tail *whop*s against my leg. He buries his head in Ester's lap, demanding affection, trying to get her out of her dark place.

'Dr Hewett …' Franklin Couch, House Orca prefect, looks ready to out of his skin. 'We might have wounded friends back there. People bu rubble. We have a duty –'

‘Do NOT speak!’ Hewett roars.

Suddenly I am back in my first day of TMS, when Daniel Lekowski washed out later in the year – dared to ask what good theoretical marin science was. I remember how terrifying Hewett can be when he gets a

Bernie stands behind the professor. He doesn’t say anything, but his presence seems to bring Hewett’s rage down to DEFCON 5.

‘We continue to San Alejandro,’ Hewett says in a more even tone. ‘ you, listen to me carefully. You may be all that remains of Harding-Pe We must not fail. Trials are cancelled. Instead, you will learn what you know on active duty. As of this moment, we are at war.’

Twenty freshmen stare back at him. They look just as scared as I fee have been trained in military tactics, yes. A lot of HP graduates go on best naval colleges in the world: Annapolis, Kuznetsov, Dalian, Ezhim But we aren’t marines or Navy SEALs. Not yet, anyway. We’re not ev graduates. We’re kids.

‘We will continue to the docks,’ Hewett says. ‘Once we are safely a will give you further instructions. In the meantime, Gemini Twain?’

‘Sir.’ Gem steps forward. He’s ready for orders, ready to be put in c of our class. Military command is what Sharks train for.

‘Standard weapons are stored in the bus’s hold?’ Hewett asks.

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Arm your team,’ Hewett says. ‘Weapons hot until further notice.’

Gem snaps his fingers. The four other Sharks run to get their gun ca

A cold sense of reality starts to pull me back into my body. When th Sharks are allowed to arm themselves, I know we are in serious, seriou trouble.

‘Prefect Twain,’ Hewett continues. ‘You have a new standing order.

Gem’s eyes gleam. ‘I understand, sir.’

‘No,’ Hewett says. ‘I’m not sure you do. As of this moment, you are responsible for one life above all others. You will not leave her side. Y protect her with your dying breath. You will make *sure* she stays alive, matter what happens.’

Gem looks confused. ‘I … Sir?’

Hewett points at me. ‘Ana Dakkar must survive.’

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CHAPTER FIVE

I don’t need this.

My school has been destroyed. My brother is probably dead. Now w
back on the bus, heading towards San Alejandro as if nothing has happ
And, on top of everything, I have Gemini Twain as a personal bodygua

Why me?

I’m not Ester, who’s descended from one of the school’s founders. M
family isn’t rich or powerful or famous. The Dakkars have been at HP
generations, yes, but so have a lot of families. I’m not the only one in t
group who may have lost a sibling in the attack, either. Brigid Salter’s
is – *was* a junior. Kay Ramsay had a sister a year older than us. Brigid
Kay look like a gentle breeze would be enough to make them both topp
right now, but neither of them has a bodyguard.

Dr Hewett sits in the front row, staring at his control pad. The sweat
blotches on his dress shirt have expanded into alien continents.

I can only hope his drones find survivors at HP.

I had no luck texting Dev. That doesn’t surprise me. The whole area
a cellular black hole, but I had to try. Now Hewett has confiscated our
and locked them in a strongbox, which makes me feel like I’m trying t
function with one arm duct-taped behind my back.

Hewett assures us his drones will alert local emergency services. I k
waiting for ambulances, police cars and fire trucks to scream past us on
way to HP. This is the only road they could take. So far, nothing. The s
is so isolated that unless Hewett calls the authorities, it could be hours
anyone notices a giant chunk of the countryside has disappeared into th

I have been fearing an attack like this for two years.

Then why didn't he *warn* us?

Maybe it's a coincidence that two years ago, my parents died on a scientific expedition for Harding-Pencroft. A tragic accident, the administrators told us. Whenever I asked for details – why Tarun and S Dakkar were on that expedition for HP, what they were looking for – t faculty at HP seemed to get selective amnesia. I assumed they were try spare my feelings, letting me work through my grief with Dr Francis.

Now I'm not so sure.

I have a sudden image of Amelia Leahy, my house captain, Dev's girlfriend, lounging in the sunlit quad this morning. She smiled and wi me good luck.

Amelia was so excited about graduating. She had big plans: the US Corps, fast track to comm school at Twentynine Palms. In her five yea HP, she'd learned twelve languages. She could break linguistic codes t stumped our professors. Her goal was to become the youngest intellige commander in corps history. Now she's gone.

I try to keep the oxygen going in and out of my lungs. I'm not doing great job with it.

I start to cry. I'm shaking with anger. Why is it that I can keep myse together when thinking about Dev, but I break down at the thought of l girlfriend dying? What is wrong with me?

'Hey, babe …' Nelinha rests a hand on my shoulder. She doesn't se sure of what else to say. She just hands me a pack of tissues.

Yeah … one tissue is not going to do it today. And I'm not the only having trouble.

By the window, Ester is still puffy-eyed and sniffling. She's furiousl writing notes on a new index card, trying to process all this awfulness. sensing who needs him most, pads over and pushes his nose between r knees. *Hi, I'm cute. Love me.*

Gem sits across the aisle. His jaw is set like a bear trap. SIG Sauer P are holstered on either side of his belt, Wild West gunslinger-style. Th his 'twins', which is how he got the nickname Gemini. Resting on his an M4A1 assault rifle.

Another one of those oddities I don't think about much: Harding-Pe has a dispensation to use military-grade equipment for our training. I s that's fortunate, seeing as we're apparently now at war with another hi school.

The bus is strangely silent. Everyone seems lost in their own dismal thoughts.

Finally, Gem asks me, ‘Do you have any idea what’s going on?’

His brown eyes reflect the landscape racing past. I’ve never seen hir much sign of stress. Now a single bead of sweat trickles down the side face.

I don’t blame him for wanting answers. I’m grateful he doesn’t sour bitter or angry at me. I know he doesn’t want to be my babysitter any r than I want him to be.

I shake my head. ‘Honestly, no idea.’

I *am* telling the truth. Yet I feel like I’m lying. I can hear the guilt in voice. I hate that feeling.

Gem taps his thumb against the stock of his rifle. ‘I’m going to need help. All of you.’ He nods to include Ester and Nelinha. ‘I know we ha always got along –’

Nelinha snorts.

‘– but you know what I’m going to say is true.’ Gem glances up the then lowers his voice. ‘The four of us are the best in our houses. No disrespect to Tia and Franklin. They’re great at what they do. But if we going to war you guys are my top picks, even if you’re not all prefects.

‘How flattering,’ Nelinha grumbles.

‘I’m just saying –’

‘Badly,’ Nelinha suggests.

‘He’s right.’ Ester keeps her attention on her note card, now almost with tiny words. ‘Tia’s our top theorist, but Nelinha’s scores in applied mechanics and combat engineering are higher. Franklin’s got more adv medical skills than me, but …’ She shrugs.

Gem gives her a dry smile. ‘But you’re Ester Harding.’

‘I was going to say I’m better at everything else,’ Ester says. ‘Excep would probably be rude. Is that rude?’

None of us bother to answer. Ester is Ester. We all know she would being a prefect. We also know she is the quintessential Orca. Her note are really just an emotional-support tool, like Top, because her mind h more information about Harding-Pencroft, natural history and marine ecosystems than all the books in our recently destroyed library. She isn of humans, with the exception of Nelinha and me, and would much rat spend her time with animals. She’s a genius empath when it comes to n

verbal communication with other species. Ester can tell what animals -
sometimes people, though she finds that harder – are thinking and feeli
She can predict their actions with uncanny accuracy … assuming her c
n show raw nerves don't overwhelm her.
of his Gem forges on. 'We're going to have to work together to figure out
happened. And what we're going to do next. You know Hewett isn't te
ıd us everything.'
nore 'He isn't telling us *anything*,' Nelinha says.
'But if I'm going to protect Ana –'
'Which I didn't ask for,' I say.
my Gemini looks like he wants to make an angry comment. He never cu
He's super strait-laced. But I think he *wants* to.
l your 'None of us asked for this.' He keeps his voice even. 'We have to
ıven't formulate a response. To do that, we have to know what we're dealing
How could Land Institute destroy our entire school?'
Ester shudders. Top immediately abandons me and jumps in her lap,
aisle, forcing her to cuddle. I've never been so grateful that Ester, and all of
this fluff tornado drama king.
e're 'Seismic detonators,' Nelinha theorizes. 'One torpedo with three wa
.' Simultaneous impacts at fracture points along the base of the cliffs –'
'Hold up,' Gem says. 'That's TMS. Pure science fiction. The techno
doesn't exist.'
'Six warheads,' Ester says. 'You'd need six. Ana probably didn't se
filled others because they were too deep. The attack would only work if they
l hack the school's security systems. Not just the grid. They'd need to fo
vanced drones, the long-range sonar, the interceptor missiles –'
'We have *interceptor* missiles?' Nelinha demands.
Strawberries bloom on Ester's cheeks. 'I wasn't supposed to say tha
ıt that I make a note to grill Ester about that later. I'm curious to know wha
she, as a Harding, might know that she isn't supposed to say. At the m
hate we have more immediate problems.
cards 'All the HP security systems are self-contained,' I say. 'The firewall
olds firewalls. There's no way anyone could hack their way in without bein
detected.'
ı't fond 'Unless …' Nelinha says.
her My mouth turns dry. 'Right. I overheard Bernie and Hewett talking
ıon- we got off the bus.'

‘“Overheard”?’ Gem makes air quotes around the word.

‘Okay, I read their lips.’

Gem’s eyes narrow. The particulars of Dolphin training aren’t comm
knowledge outside our house. I imagine he is rewinding the last two ye
wondering what else I might have *overheard*. ‘And what did they say?

I glance at Dr Hewett, still fiddling with his control pad. Whatever h
in his readouts, he clearly doesn’t like it.

‘Bernie mentioned “inside help”,’ I say. ‘Which means –’

‘Someone at HP sabotaged us.’ Gem is definitely biting back a curse
‘And if that person didn’t want to die in the attack –’

‘They would be on this bus.’

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CHAPTER SIX

Half an hour later, we arrive at the docks where our training vessel, the *Varuna*, is moored.

While the other students unload the bus's cargo bay, I pull the Dolphins aside in the parking lot: Lee-Ann, Virgil, Jack and Halimah.

'Tá fealltóir againn,' I tell them.

Literally, this translates as *There is a betrayer at us*, which seems appropriate.

We've been using Irish as our internal code since the beginning of the year. Irish is so rare that the chance of anyone understanding a word we is remote. Each class of Dolphins chooses their own language. Amelia learned Coptic. The juniors had Maltese. The sophomores chose Latin because they had no imagination. If you don't have a talent for languages you wash out of House Dolphin pretty quick.

I tell my housemates what I suspect. Sabotage. Treachery. Cold-blooded murder.

It's a lot to take in.

Telling them is a risk. I have no idea who betrayed the school. Any one could have done it. But I can't start mistrusting everyone. I need their help.

Dolphins focus on communication and exploration, but we also train in espionage. I want my housemates on high alert.

Halimah Nasser looks so angry I imagine steam bubbling under her hijab. 'How do we find the traitor? And what do we do with them?'

'For now,' I say, 'just watch and listen.'

In Irish, this is ‘Bígí ag faire agus ag éisteacht.’ *Be at your watching listening*. Again, that sums things up pretty well.

Lee-Ann Best’s face is brick red. She’s our best at counterespionage probably takes this news as a personal insult. She scans the faces of ou classmates, no doubt assessing each of them for the potential of betray had friends in the other grades.’

‘We all did,’ Jack Wu says. He lifts one eyebrow towards Dr Hewet ‘Ana, you have any idea why the professor assigned a Shark to you?’

The Shark in question, Gemini Twain, stands just out of earshot. He surveying the wharf for any sign of threats. I wish he didn’t take his bodyguard duties quite so seriously.

The docks aren’t crowded, but Gem gets some strange looks from th fishermen. I guess it’s not every day they see a fourteen-year-old stand sentry with a military-grade assault rifle and two sidearms. Gem just n them politely and tells them good morning. They give him a wide bert

‘No clue,’ I say. ‘Hopefully we’ll find out once we’re at sea.’

Virgil Esparza has been quietly staring at the crushed-shell road. No says, ‘He used to teach at Land Institute, you know.’

My shoulders tighten. ‘Who?’

He nods towards Dr Hewett.

I’m so stunned I can’t remember the Irish for *Are you kidding me?*

‘Freshmen!’ Hewett calls out. ‘Gather up!’

I give my Dolphins one last order in sign language, tapping my temp with all four fingertips: *Be alert.*

We take our places. Fifteen of us make a semicircle facing Dr Hewe Dolphins, Cephalopods, Orcas. The Sharks stand around the perimeter weapons ready. Gemini Twain moves to Dr Hewett’s side, where he ca keep an eye on me and make clear that he is the dominant freshman.

Ester scratches Top’s ears. He sits next to her patiently, his brown e locked on Hewett as if to say, *See? I can be a good boy.*

To my surprise, Nelinha has managed to wash her face and reapply make-up. How did she do that so quickly? She gives me a wink, a gest solidarity.

My heart hurts. I love my friends so much. I love this entire class, e individuals I don’t like that much. I hate whoever tore our world apart.

Hewett wraps up his conversation with three HP security guards wh walked over from the pier. I guess they were on board the *Varuna*, kee

and an eye on it until we arrived. They all look shaken. Hewett must have t
them about the attack.

. She For a moment, I'm relieved. At least we'll have more adult backup.

r Then Hewett gives them an order. I lip-read the words *Buy us time.*

al. 'I The guards nod grimly. They jog over to the shuttle bus. Bernie sits
the wheel, the engine idling. As soon as the guards are on board, Berni

t. closes the doors. He gives me a listless wave, his expression part conce
part apology. Then he drives away, shells crunching under the wheels.

's Why would Hewett dismiss three perfectly good guards? Why woul
send Bernie away, along with our bus?

There's no longer any school for them to return to. *Buy us time* soun

ıe local disturbingly like a command you'd give a suicide squad.

ling This whole situation is wrong. I don't want Hewett as our only adult

ods at supervisor. I remember what Virgil said: *He used to teach at Land Inst*

h. Not to mention his less-than-robust physical condition. The professo
face is almost as colourless as his droopy mop of hair. I try to guess ho

w he he is. Sixty? Seventy? It's hard to tell.

I wonder when he taught at Land Institute, and how he ended up her
don't know much about our rival school. They follow the same basic
curriculum as HP – marine sciences, naval warfare. Maybe LI is slight
more on the warfare side, while HP leans slightly more towards scienti
research, but our grads often end up working side by side in the world'

ple navies and maritime institutes. The way the upperclassmen talk about I
you'd think its students are all sociopaths and their teachers have devil

tt: and pointy tails. I always assumed the upperclassmen were exaggeratir

, After this morning, I understand.

an both Hewett gives his tablet a sour look. Then he regards us as if he can't
which is the bigger disappointment. 'Freshmen, you need to understan

yes this is no longer a weekend trip. This is an indefinite assignment. All o
are in danger, not just Ana Dakkar.'

her The others glance at me. Awkward.

ure of 'Yes, yes,' Hewett says, acknowledging their concern. 'I will explai
we are out of range.'

ven the He doesn't say out of range of *what*.

I look past him. The school's 120-foot training vessel waits at the en

o have pier six. The *Varuna* is the biggest yacht in the harbour by far. I love th

ping named after the Hindu sea god. Usually, when I see its gleaming white

feel proud and excited. Painted on the prow is the HP logo with the fou
house icons – shark, dolphin, cephalopod, orca – inside the quadrants o
old-fashioned nautical wheel. The words HARDING-PENCROFT scroll belo
Today, the sight makes me blink back a fresh swell of tears. The ship i
behind we have of the academy now.

Hewett continues, ‘I know you have questions …’

‘I do,’ says Rhys Morrow, one of the bolder Orcas. ‘Sir, our families
think we’re dead. We have to contact them –’

‘*No,*’ Hewett snaps. ‘Miss Morrow, I know this is hard to hear. But,
now, your families are safer, *you* are safer, if the world thinks you are
We must hope that Land Institute doesn’t yet realize this class escaped
attack. If we can disappear before they …’

He glances at his control pad. Whatever blood remains in his face se
drain away. Gem catches his arm before he can fall sideways.

Gem frowns at the screen. He mutters a question I can hear just fine
without lip-reading: ‘Sir, what *is* that?’

Hewett’s eyes have more life in them than the entire rest of his body
They’re incandescent with fear.

‘Everyone on board,’ he says. ‘We need to leave *NOW*.’

feel proud and excited. Painted on the prow is the HP logo with the four house icons – shark, dolphin, cephalopod, orca – inside the quadrants of an old-fashioned nautical wheel. The words HARDING-PENCROFT scroll below. Today, the sight makes me blink back a fresh swell of tears. The ship is all we have of the academy now.

Hewett continues, 'I know you have questions …'

'I do,' says Rhys Morrow, one of the bolder Orcas. 'Sir, our families will think we're dead. We have to contact them –'

'*No*,' Hewett snaps. 'Miss Morrow, I know this is hard to hear. But, for now, your families are safer, *you* are safer, if the world thinks you are dead. We must hope that Land Institute doesn't yet realize this class escaped the attack. If we can disappear before they …'

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CHAPTER SEVEN

It’s not that simple.

With a 120-foot yacht, you can’t just turn on the ignition and speed
Supplies have to be stowed, systems checked, moorings cleared. Over
past two years, we’ve worked on the *Varuna* half a dozen times. We k
the ship, and we know our jobs. Still, it takes time to get ready.

It doesn’t help that we find ourselves stumbling over equipment we’
never seen on board before. On deck, several metal crates the size of w
machines have been lashed down and covered with tarps. Belowdecks,
corridors are lined with smaller boxes that look like foot lockers – eac
with a biometric fingerprint pad and labelled GOLD-LEVEL CLEARANCE.

I’ve seen boxes like these at school, but only from a distance. Usual
they’re being transported to and from Verne Hall under armed guard.
Whatever is inside is top secret. Only faculty and upperclassmen are al
to work with them.

Suddenly we’re surrounded by the containers. It’s like we’ve spent t
years being told not to touch the artwork and now we’re tripping over
Picassos. It’s unnerving that Hewett moved so much valuable school p
to the *Varuna*, especially right *before* HP was wiped off the map …

It might be easier to guess what Hewett was thinking if I knew what
the boxes. Dev never gave me the slightest hint. Whenever I pestered h
he’d say, *You’ll find out soon enough.*

Don’t think about Dev, I chide myself.

But that’s impossible. Simply getting through the day is like swimm
through an underwater minefield. Tomorrow will be just as hard. And
next day. You might think the horror of losing my parents would have

me some coping strategies for dealing with this kind of tragedy. It hasn
anything, it makes the stab to the chest even more painful.

I try to lock those feelings away in a gold box of my own. I have wo
do. I check the comm-system batteries, the satellite dish, the VHF aeria
3-D sonar transducer. Gemini tags along behind me, alternately giving
to his Sharks and making sure I am not being accosted by any ninja sea

We've barely pulled away from the pier when Hewett's voice comes
the loudspeaker. 'Prefects, report to the bridge.'

Franklin and Tia are already there when Gem and I arrive.

Tia is piloting. Franklin hovers fretfully over Dr Hewett, who's spra
in the captain's chair, wheezing like he's just run a 10K.

'Sir,' Franklin says, 'at least let me take your blood pressure.'

What's wrong with the professor? I wonder. This seems like more th
stress reaction …

'I'm fine.' Hewett waves him aside. Then the professor struggles to
feet and hobbles to the chart table. 'Gather round, you four.'

Tia Romero looks uneasy about this, since she's officer of the watch
checks the autopilot and the ECDIS one more time before joining us at
table. I wish she could stay at the helm. I want her pushing the boat to
maximum speed so we can get away from whatever Dr Hewett saw on
control pad. It's driving me crazy to not know what we're running fron

On the laminated surface of the table sits a gold-level box. If Gemin
Twain keeps breathing down my neck, I'm thinking the box might be l
enough for me to stuff his body into if I can fold him over enough time

'Normally,' says Dr Hewett, 'the information I'm about to give you
be revealed in stages. This weekend's trials were meant to be your first
exposure to Harding-Pencroft's true mission.'

'True mission?' Franklin brushes his streak of blue hair behind his l
He's always struck me as a bit of a follower, but I *do* like that one rebe
gesture against our dress code. 'Isn't the school mission to prepare us f
careers at sea?'

'Partially,' Hewett says. 'Having our graduates in positions of powe
us in many ways. But we intend to prepare you for much more than tha
scowls at me in particular. 'You are meant to become the custodians of
Harding-Pencroft's secrets, the agents of its great agenda. It is a heavy
responsibility. Not every student succeeds.'

This talk of secrets and agendas makes the hair stand up on the nape neck. I don't know what he means, but I can't shake the feeling that wh says not every student succeeds, he means *survives*. I wonder what De thought of this 'great agenda'.

I glance at the other prefects. They look just as confused as I am.

Hewett sighs, the way he does when he passes back our graded essa 'And now you require a crash course. Dakkar, open the case.'

My lower back muscles clench. I've been warned for two years: try opening a gold-level case as an underclassman and you'll get expelled, assuming the attempt doesn't kill you. I guess Hewett wouldn't order C protect my life at all costs if he was just going to kill me with a booby Still …

I press my hand against the biometric pad. The lid pops open like it' waiting.

Inside, nested in black foam, are four of the strangest-looking guns I ever seen.

'Oh, wow!' Gem says. This is the strongest exclamation I've ever he from him. His eyes gleam like a kid in front of a Christmas tree. He gla at Dr Hewett. 'May I?'

Hewett nods.

Carefully, Gem extracts one of the guns. The weapon is too big to b pistol, too small to be a shotgun. Some kind of miniature grenade laun An oversize flare gun? Whatever it is, it's been meticulously handcraft leather grip is tooled with a wave design. The golden barrel looks electroplated with some kind of copper alloy. Wires run along the outs braided vines. The stock-loaded magazine is too short and thick for an of ammunition I can think of. It's plated with the same alloy, which so has gone to the trouble of engraving with the HP logo.

There's no way these guns can be functional. They're too ornate, lik nineteenth-century officers' swords or duelling pistols – works of art n meant to be used. I've never said this about any kind of firearm before they're strangely beautiful.

'This is a Leyden gun,' Gem marvels.

The name doesn't ring any bells. I look at Franklin, our Orca rep. H Orca knows all the obscure historical facts and weird bits of trivia. The members could destroy anyone on *Jeopardy!* They excel at other thing but we jokingly call them House Wikipedia.

Franklin nods. ‘Jules Verne.’

Hewett curls his lip, like the author’s name is an unpleasant but nece fact of life. ‘Yes. Well. Shockingly, he reported a few things correctly.

I remember now. The summer before our chum year, we had to read Verne’s *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* and *The Mysterious Island*, the science fiction novels about marine technology. I’d assumed the point assignment was *Let’s expand our minds with some ‘fun’ (air quotes) re about the sea!* Honestly, I found the books an annoying slog. The plots slow. The language was super dated. The characters were a bunch of harrumphing Victorian-era gentlemen I didn’t care about.

Two of the main characters in *The Mysterious Island* were Harding Pencroft, men with the same surnames as the founders of our school. A time I’d thought, *Okay, that’s a little weird.* Later in the book, when th sci-fi submarine commander Captain Nemo revealed that his real name Prince Dakkar, I admit I got a shiver down my back. But the books we fiction. Seeing as the most important building at HP was Verne Hall, I supposed the school’s founders must have been hardcore Jules Verne fanboys. Maybe they recruited my family generations ago as an elabor inside joke, because they liked our surname.

Beyond that, I had two main takeaways from Jules Verne. First, the *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* didn’t mean what I thought it did. Old Nemo hadn’t dived to a *depth* of 20,000 leagues. That’s 60,000 nautica miles, which would have plunged his sub through the earth and a quart the way to the moon. Instead, the book title meant he’d travelled a *dist* 60,000 nautical miles underwater, which was still crazy by nineteenth-century standards. It meant he circled the world seven and a half times old rusty can, the *Nautilus.*

The other thing I’d taken away from the book: Verne had come up v some cool ideas that would never work. One of those was Leyden guns think the name came from some electrical research Dutch scientists did city of Leyden in the 1700s. I’m also pretty sure I got that question wr Dr Hewett’s midterm.

‘It can’t be real.’ Tia Romero picks up another gun and removes the magazine.

‘Careful, Prefect,’ Hewett warns her.

I’m losing my patience.

Our school has been destroyed for I-don't-know-what-reason. My b
may be dead. We're on the run from Land Institute, going I-don't-kno
where. Now it turns out our big gold-level secret is that Dr Hewett enj
live-action role playing.

He's brought along boxes of handcrafted Jules Verne ray guns so w
run around the boat all weekend pretending to shoot one another while
yelling *Pew-pew!* I'm starting to doubt his sanity. And I'm starting to
my sanity for following his orders.

'Sir.' I struggle to keep the anger out of my voice. 'Maybe you can t
what's going on. Then we can play with your toys later?'

I expect him to yell at me. I'm prepared for that. I really don't care a
more. Instead, he studies me with a sad, heavy expression – the kind I
from HP faculty whenever they mentioned my parents.

'Prefect Twain, may I?' Hewett holds out his hand.

Reluctantly, Gem surrenders the Leyden gun.

Dr Hewett looks it over, maybe checking the settings. He gives Gem
weary smile. 'I hope you'll forgive me, Prefect. This will be faster tha
explaining.'

'Sir?' Gem asks.

Hewett shoots him. The only sound is a high-pressure hiss. For a
millisecond, Gem is wrapped in flickering white tendrils of electricity.

Then his eyes cross, and he collapses in a heap.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

‘You killed him!’ Franklin rushes to Gem’s side.

Hewett turns a dial on the stock of his weapon and nonchalantly say I?’

Tia looks at me with alarm, silently asking what we should do.

I’m paralysed between the desire to help Gem and the urge to tackle teacher.

Franklin presses two fingers against Gem’s neck. ‘N-no. He’s got a pulse.’ He scowls at Dr Hewett. ‘You can’t just go around *electrocutin* people!’

‘There will be no permanent damage,’ Hewett assures us.

‘That’s kind of not the point,’ I say, at the risk of getting shot.

Having heard that Gem won’t die, Tia turns her attention to her own Leyden gun. Like any good Cephalopod, she sets it down and starts to disassemble it. Her mass of bronze corkscrew hair sways and bounces her face like the coils of a complicated machine. She extracts a project from the top of the magazine and holds it up for inspection. It’s a shiny lozenge about the size and shape of … Well, honestly, the first thing it reminds me of is a tampon.

‘Some kind of glass?’ Tia asks.

‘Not exactly,’ says Hewett. ‘Each projectile is based on a Leyden ja stores an electrical charge that is released upon impact. But the casing constructed from a special type of secreted calcium carbonate.’

‘Like abalone shell,’ I say.

Hewett looks pleased. ‘Precisely, Prefect Dakkar.’

I try not to feel gratified about giving him a correct response. We're class any more. Also, he just shot my bodyguard.

'If the casing is secreted,' I say, 'what is it secreted *from*?'

Hewett just smiles. Suddenly I don't want to know.

'Upon discharge,' he says, 'every trace of the projectile is destroyed stun effect lasts anywhere from a few minutes to an hour, depending o target's constitution.'

As if on cue, Gem wakes with a snort. He sits up, shaking his head. happened?'

'Hewett shot you,' Franklin says.

Gem looks at Hewett with awe, as if he didn't know the old man wa capable of being so cool.

'You're fine,' Hewett tells him. 'On your feet, Prefect. I was just ab explain. In the event of another attack by Land Institute, you will use t weapons. You'll find them more reliable than conventional guns.'

Gem's expression changes to disbelief. 'More reliable than my SIG Sauers?'

'I'm not doubting your skills, Mr Twain,' Hewett says. 'I'm aware t have the highest marksmanship scores in the school's history. But our enemies will have body armour that is quite effective against standard firearms.'

'Kevlar isn't perfect –'

'I'm not talking about Kevlar.' Hewett's expression hardens. 'Besid will shoot to incapacitate, not to kill. We are not Land Institute. We ar than that.'

His tone is so bitter I wonder if I was wrong to suspect him. He sou genuinely disgusted with his former employer. I just wish I understoo he left them and graced us with his presence.

'The range of the Leyden guns is limited,' he continues. 'However, contact with the target's body will release the charge. You will find th accurate to a hundred feet.'

'One third the range of my regular handguns,' Gem mutters.

'Let us hope you do not have to test your skills with either type of weapon,' Hewett says dryly. 'But we must be prepared. There are thre boxes like this one in the armoury. I've set the locks to open to the fin of any prefect. Mr Twain, arm your Sharks first. Then the rest of the c

not in Tia is shaking her head. ‘Sir … how do these things even *work*? The
shouldn’t be possible.’

Hewett grimaces – his famous *Lord, give me patience* expression. ‘I
Romero, the impossible is merely the possible for which we don’t yet
. The the science.’

n the ‘But –’

‘I understand it is a lot to absorb,’ he says. ‘Normally during freshm
‘What trials, I would introduce the Leyden gun and leave it at that for the day
save the more outlandish alt-tech for Saturday and Sunday.’

‘Alt-tech?’ Franklin asks.

s ‘*More* outlandish?’ Gem sounds excited, like he’s volunteering for f
target practice.

out to ‘Unfortunately,’ Hewett says, ignoring both questions, ‘we don’t ha
hese luxury of time. To survive, we will need everything we have. Miss Ro
you see that case against the far wall? You remember my lecture on op
electric camouflage, I hope.’

Tia blinks. ‘Like the skin of an octopus.’

hat you ‘Exactly. That case contains projection modules. They must be insta
around the exterior of the hull, just above the waterline at one-metre in
Do you understand?’

‘I … Um, yes?’

‘Good.’ Hewett glances out of the window. He looks frustrated to se
es, we close we still are to shore. ‘Mr Couch, there’s another case on the benc
e better behind you. Inside is a pulse-dispersion unit. Please install it on the for
deck. It should jam any radar or sonar.’

ıds ‘Uh …’ Franklin’s face is turning almost as blue as the streak in his
l why like he’s forgotten to breathe for the last several minutes. ‘Okay, sir.’

‘Now, Miss Dakkar –’

any ‘Alt-tech,’ I blurt out.

e guns I feel like I’m emerging from a trance, or maybe going into one. At
point, I’m not sure I’d know the difference. I don’t even correct Hewet
the *Miss Dakkar* thing, which I find incredibly patronizing.

‘Your class,’ I say. ‘Theoretical Marine Science. All the bizarre, dar
e more tech you talked about. It isn’t theoretical at all, is it?’

gerprint He gives me that sad expression again. ‘Oh, my dear, I am so sorry.
ew.’ This apology scares me worse than anything he could have said. An
dear? He’s only ever called me Prefect Dakkar (my correct title), or M

Dakkar (which I hate), or sometimes *hey, you* if he's feeling particular perky.

It seems dangerous to keep asking questions. It feels like I'm standi the highest cliff I've ever dived from. I take the plunge anyway. 'You Jules Verne *reported* a few things correctly. You didn't say he *foresa imagined*. Are you telling us the events in those novels actually happe

Hewett sets down his Leyden gun. His fingertips linger over the ela wiring on the barrel. 'The age-old question: where do authors get their In the case of Verne, the answer was personal interviews. He heard ru He sought eyewitnesses. Those witnesses lied to him about certain det protect themselves. Verne changed other facts to make his stories read well, *stories*. But yes, my dear, the bulk of those tales is true.'

A fragile silence descends on the bridge. The only sounds are the hu the engines and the thump of waves breaking on the prow. The other p look dazed. When Hewett talks again, they lean in, as if trying to hear from a century-old phonograph.

'Since the school's founding,' he says, 'we have been able to reprod some of Nemo's alt-tech. Much of it we still do not understand. The m of Harding-Pencroft is to safeguard his legacy, keep his technology ou hands of human society, and thwart Land Institute, which would use al to dominate the world. I'm afraid, as of today, the balance of power th existed between our schools for nearly a hundred and fifty years has b broken. Land Institute is on the verge of final victory.'

I study Dr Hewett's aggrieved expression. My nerves feel like a sho herring all swimming frantically in different directions. Finally, I can't contain the chaos any more. I burst out laughing.

I must look like I've gone crazy. I can't help it. My life has been up *again*. I've lost my brother, my school, my future. I've been running o adrenalin for hours. And we're talking about Captain Nemo!

I hug my ribs. I wheeze and blink away the tears. I'm pretty sure tha I stop laughing, I'll cry myself to death. Franklin steps towards me. He sense I'm near a breakdown. Even Gem and Tia look worried.

Hewett's eyes remain as dark as squid ink. 'I'm sorry, Miss Dakkar.

'*Prefect*,' I correct him, though it's hard to come across as serious w I'm wheezing hysterically.

Hewett frowns. 'I wish we had more time. We spent almost a year s orienting your brother. He was being trained to lead, to take over wher

parents left off. As much promise as he showed, the pressure nearly destroyed him. Now, I'm afraid I have to ask even *more* of you. I wish

He's interrupted by a *ding* from his tablet computer. I've never hear make any sound before, and despite the cheerful noise I can tell from Hewett's expression it isn't good news.

'They've found us,' he announces.

Gem's hands gravitate to his sidearms. 'Is it the thing I saw on your before? What *was* that?'

'No time,' Hewett says. 'Alert the crew. We're under attack!'

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CHAPTER NINE

They literally erupt from the sea.

I have time to yell ‘Incoming!’ before scuba divers rocket to the sur
our starboard side, all on kickboard-size DPVs – diver propulsion vehi
moving at twelve knots or more, faster than any I’ve ever seen. I regist
eight hostiles, some carrying strange silvery weapons that look like ha
guns, others brandishing … Wait, are those *grenade launchers*?

Two fist-size metal canisters plunk onto our gangway and roll hissir
steaming across the deck.

‘Flash bangs!’ Gem yells.

I shut my eyes and cover my ears, but the explosions still leave my l
ringing. For a moment, I can only stagger in a daze through plumes of
smoke. By the time my crewmates and I have recovered from our conf
our enemies have fastened grappling hooks to the starboard rail, discar
their DPVs and oxygen tanks, and begun climbing over our gunwale li
they’ve been practising this assault for months.

Eloise and Cooper are the first to return fire. They spray our attacke
their M4A1s, but it’s like they’re shooting wax bullets. The rounds ma
smoking white impact points against our enemies’ wetsuits, making th
flinch but causing no visible damage.

Two hostiles fire their silver weapons. Miniature harpoons impale E
shoulder and Cooper’s leg. White arcs of electricity blossom from the
projectiles, and both Sharks crumple.

I scream in rage. My friends closest to starboard, most still unarmed
charge the intruders. It’s a desperate move, but a melee with armed
opponents is better than getting shot down one by one, and we seem to

numbers on our side. I want to join them – I want to take apart these at with my bare hands for the destruction of my school, for Dev – but Ge holds me back.

'Fire if you see an opening.' He hands me a Leyden gun. 'But *stay b me*, please.' I bristle at his demeaning orders but obey as he yells to his remaining housemates. 'Dru, Kiya!'

He tosses them each a gun from his gold-level case like he's Militia Claus. 'Point and shoot!'

Perfect instructions for a Shark.

Two more attackers are just climbing over the rail. Gem makes them for their late arrival by shooting both of them centre mass. They topple backwards, flickering like defective Christmas lights until they hit the Maybe their wetsuits will keep them afloat. Maybe they'll come to bef they drown. At the moment, that's not my biggest concern.

Dru Cardenas shoots another intruder. Unfortunately, the electricity arcs to Nelinha, who had been in the process of pummelling said intruc with a socket wrench. Both of them go down.

Five enemies left, scuffling with about ten of our crew who happene on deck at the time. Why would they attack us with so few? And wher Hewett? He hasn't yet followed us out from the bridge. Just as I was st to believe he might not be a traitor, my trust pendulum swings back to *extreme doubt*.

I can't tell much about our attackers. Dive masks and full hoods obs their faces. Nevertheless, the Land Institute insignia is clearly emblazo the breast of each wetsuit: an old-fashioned harpoon in silver, its rope a circle around the letters LI.

Our attackers must be upperclassmen – they look taller and older tha but not like adults. Land Institute surely has faculty trained in combat, security, adult alumni. If catching us is so important, why are they sen students? And, as nasty as those harpoon guns look, they don't appear designed to kill. After destroying our entire school, why hesitate to use force?

I wonder if this could be a ruse … some sort of training exercise. No destruction of HP was real enough.

But this whole thing smells fishy …

My hands are sweaty on the stock of the Leyden gun. I can't get a cl shot. After what happened to Nelinha, I'm not going to fire randomly i

tackers crowd with a weapon I don't fully understand.

m One attacker shoots Meadow Newman point-blank with a mini-harp Leyden pistol. She falls, electric sparks popping around her. Ester gets

ehind revenge by body-slamming the guy – Ester is an excellent defensive li

s – and the attacker goes down flailing. Top joins the party, clamping his around the guy's throat, which is absolutely a form of emotional suppo

Santa not for the strange bulletproof fabric of the dive hood, the guy would b Top's lunch. As it is, he crab-walks backwards, screaming and trying t shake off the furious twenty-pound fluff demon attached to his windpi

n pay *This is too easy*, I mutter to myself, though I doubt my unconscious

e classmates would agree. Six are now out of commission, some bleedin

water. nasty harpoon barbs.

ore Still, I feel like I'm missing something …

Perhaps Land Institute wasn't expecting opposition. After destroyin

also school, maybe they thought they'd find a bunch of terrified freshmen v

der would plead for their lives. The four remaining attackers are holding th own, kicking, jabbing, using their greater size and strength, but it's onl

ed to be matter of time before we overwhelm them. Gem, Dru and Kiya keep th

e is Dr guns trained on the chaos, though I can tell from their postures even th

tarting starting to relax. They think we've almost won.

wards LI planned this assault carefully. Their movements were synchroniz They made as flashy an entrance as they could on our starboard side. V

cure would they botch it? Unless …

ned on 'Gem!' I call.

making He doesn't seem to hear me. Between the gunfire, the ship's engines the residual ringing from the flash bangs, I'm not surprised. It's enoug

an us, to cover up almost anything. All three Sharks have eyes forward, keep

armed behind them and facing the obvious threat.

ding *Think like a Dolphin*, I tell myself. *Espionage, not frontal assault.*

A thousand tiny crabs scuttle down my back. *It's a feint.*

e lethal 'GEM!' I yell again.

I start to turn, to check the port side of the boat, but I'm too slow. M

o. The I'm still in shock from grief, or maybe I'm dazed from the grenades. I' only made it ninety degrees when someone behind me locks his forear across my throat. I feel a sharp pain like a wasp sting in the side of my

lear Terror washes through my veins along with whatever they've inject

nto the with. The Leyden gun slips from my numb fingers.

I've been trained in a dozen ways to get out of a chokehold, but my
turn to putty. My arms hang uselessly at my side. I can't feel anything
the panic building in my chest. Off the port side of the *Varuna*, I can n
the pontoon my captor came in on. Another LI commando mans the ou
motor.

The Sharks are shouting now. At least I got their attention. Dru and
flank my captor, their guns raised. Kiya reaches the port rail first, notic
pontoon and immediately shoots at the guy on board. She hits the moto
instead. The guy fires back, and Kiya collapses in a shimmering Tesla

'HOLD YOUR FIRE!' my captor roars. 'Or Ana Dakkar dies!'

He twists so his back is to the rail and I'm between him and the Sha
knows my name. Of course … I was the target all along. I don't unders
the motive, but this whole attack has been about capturing me.

Gem and Dru keep their Leyden guns trained on us. On the starboar
of the deck, the last LI commando goes down when Tia Romero smash
in the groin with a fire extinguisher.

I lock eyes with Gemini Twain. I try to say *Just shoot us both*, but m
voice won't work.

'I wouldn't,' my captor warns Gem. 'Maybe you didn't notice the n
I've got at your friend's neck. Nasty what you can make from sea-snak
venom. She'll survive, unless you freshmen get stupid with those Leyd
guns. Shock me, you shock her. That *really* wouldn't be good for her n
system right now.'

Slowly, Gem sets down his Leyden gun. Then, just as slowly, he dra
twin SIG Sauers. 'How about I shoot you in the mouth instead?' he sug
– calm and polite, as if he's offering our guest a moist towelette. 'Unle
face is bulletproof, too.'

Gem is an excellent marksman, but that doesn't decrease my level o
panic. My captor's face happens to be right next to mine.

'I don't care how good a shot you are, Twain,' my captor snarls. He
Gem, too. He's done his homework. 'This needle *will* go into her neck
second dose of sea-snake venom? Definitely fatal. I'm going over the s
now, with Dakkar. And you're going to let me.'

'You're just going to leave your friends behind?' Gem flicks one of
gun barrels towards the pile of unconscious LI commandos now decor
our starboard deck. 'How about we make a trade?'

knees My captor snorts. ‘Keep them. They did their job. This one, though?
except tightens his grip on my throat. ‘None of us can afford to see *her* get kil
ow see can we?’
ıtboard My captor and I tumble backwards – free-falling from the side of th
Varuna. I get a glimpse of blue sky. I feel the *thunk* of our impact as w
Gem into the water. Then the cold sea closes over my face like the folds of a
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My captor snorts. ‘Keep them. They did their job. This one, though?’ He tightens his grip on my throat. ‘None of us can afford to see *her* get killed, can we?’

My captor and I tumble backwards – free-falling from the side of the *Varuna*. I get a glimpse of blue sky. I feel the *thunk* of our impact as we crash into the water. Then the cold sea closes over my face like the folds of a burial shroud.



CHAPTER TEN

When we surface, I'm choking and spluttering. I have a blurry view of classmates gathered above, their grim faces lining the port rail of the *V* Dr Hewett is there too now, looking seasick. Gemini Twain has switch his M4A1, the rifle's sight fixed on my captor.

The *Varuna* has cut her engines. The world is quiet except for the sl waves against the hull and my captor's ragged breathing in my ear. It r hard work pulling me along, using me as a human shield while swimm backwards towards his pontoon. I hope he drowns.

Above us, Gem says grimly, 'I've got the shot, sir.'

I don't think he meant for us to hear this comment, but voices carry The idea of him firing makes my stomach twist. With the ocean swells the movements of the ship and my captor, it would be a tough shot eve Gem. Besides, I assume my captor still has his little hypodermic needl somewhere at hand. I hope he sticks himself with it.

'Stand down, Mr Twain,' Hewett orders.

Really? I think. *That's all you've got, Hewett?*

'That's right,' my captor mocks. 'Stand down, Mr Twain.'

Hewett narrows his eyes. 'Caleb South, I know your voice. Don't do

Caleb curses. Apparently, he doesn't love Hewett any more than I d

We reach the pontoon. Another set of rough hands grabs me. The gu the motor hauls me aboard.

'Dave,' my captor snaps, still in the water. 'Keep a needle on her wh get aboard.'

Great. I've been abducted by two evildoers named Caleb and Dave. wonder if the Land Institute yearbook voted them most likely to open a family restaurant or maybe a gardening centre.

My limbs still aren't working, but I can feel some tingling in my toe toxin is wearing off. I try to speak. All that comes out is a gurgle.

Caleb South climbs into the boat. He pulls me over him so I'm once blocking Gem's line of sight. Dave scoots astern and starts messing wi outboard engine.

'Dave, hurry,' Caleb barks.

'I'm trying,' Dave mutters. 'That stupid girl shot the motor.'

This makes me happy. I hope the engine explodes in Dave's face.

Dr Hewett calls down from the deck, 'Caleb, listen to me. This is madness.'

'Yeah, I remember your lectures.' Caleb's tone is as toxic as his syri venom. 'Our plans are madness, blah-blah. But the *Aronnax* is operatic now and Harding-Pencroft is gone, so maybe you were the crazy one t us, huh?'

I don't know what the *Aronnax* is. The name alone makes me shiver sounds sharp and heavy like a cleaver's blade. On the other hand, the f I'm able to shiver is good news. I try to move my head. It lolls to one s Any hour now, I'll be ready for combat.

'Your new toy is nothing,' Hewett tells Caleb. 'Dakkar is everything

'*Toy?!*' Caleb shouts.

'After what you did this morning,' Hewett continues, 'to the academ Ana's brother? She's irreplaceable.'

I don't like the way Hewett is talking about me – as if I'm a valuabl commodity rather than a person. I wonder if he'll start bargaining, may offer to split me in half so they can share the profits.

I can feel Caleb's fingers trembling on my throat. He's getting agita and he's holding a needle against my carotid artery. I don't like that combination.

In the stern of the pontoon, Dave lets out a triumphant 'Ha!'

The outboard motor sputters to life.

'Goodbye, Dr Hewett,' Caleb calls as the pontoon pulls away. 'You as a teacher anyway.'

Well, Hewett may not be aiding and abetting the LI students, but he much help to me, either. I can think of only one thing to do. I gurgle lo

I enough to get Caleb's attention.

a He tightens his grip on my neck. 'What's that, Dakkar?'

I babble like I'm trying to tell him something important. I sense him

s. The leaning in. It's human nature – he wants to know what I'm saying. I ju timing and angle. Then I use the only weapon I have. I snap my head

again backwards and hear the satisfying crunch of Caleb's nose breaking.

th the He screams and loosens his grip – just for a moment, but it's enough wet fingers lose their traction on my throat as I twist away from his po palm and limply topple out of the boat.

I take a gulp of air before my head goes under. My limbs are soggy noodles, but I manage to keep my chest upright for buoyancy. I bob to surface long enough to hear the hiss of a Leyden gun from the *Varuna*. yelps.

inge of Caleb growls and dives into the water after me. Two shots from Ger

onal M4A1 zing off the back of his wetsuit. Caleb grabs me by the hair and

o leave dragging me after the pontoon, which is rapidly getting away from us.

'They told me to bring you back alive,' he says. 'But if I can't do th

. It Out of the corner of my eye, I see him raise his free hand. The inject

act that needle protrudes from the inside of a ring slipped on his middle finger.

side. reminds me of the gag handshake buzzer Dev used to torment me with we were little. I don't want that to be my last thought.

g.' Gem fires another shot. It ricochets off Caleb's hooded forehead and splashes a few inches from my ear. Hewett yells, 'Stop firing!'

ıy, to I try to struggle. My body won't obey me. Caleb sneers. The blood f his nostrils makes him look like he's got walrus tusks.

e 'You're more trouble than you're worth,' he decides.

/be He pulls back his hand to slap me with his poison buzzer ring – but comes from an unexpected direction. Right next to us, a mass of sleek

ted, grey flesh explodes out of the sea, and Caleb is body-slammed into ob under the weight of a six-hundred-pound bottlenose dolphin.

The resulting waves push me under. My sinuses fill with salt water. sinking, flailing my weak limbs.

Then the dolphin slides underneath me, gently nudging me to the su

sucked wrap my arms around his dorsal fin, which is marked with a prominen streak.

isn't We break the surface. My first word is a cross between a choke and

ud 'Socrates?'

I have no idea how he found me, or how he knew I needed help, but familiar clicks and squeaks leave me no doubt what he is saying. *I tried warn you, silly human.*

I lay my face against his smooth, warm forehead and start to weep.

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I lay my face against his smooth, warm forehead and start to weep.



CHAPTER ELEVEN

We don’t let Caleb drown.

If we’d put it to a vote, I’m not sure he would’ve had enough suppo
Dr Hewett insists we fish him out of the water. Then Kiya and Dru hau
off for interrogation.

The rest of the LI attackers we strip of their weapons, constrain with
ties and set adrift in the pontoon. Dr Hewett assures us they’ll get pick
soon enough – by the Coast Guard if they’re lucky, by their schoolmat
they’re not.

‘Land Institute doesn’t reward failure,’ he says. ‘We must get under

Tia Romero stares at him in disbelief. ‘Sir, we’ve been attacked. We
wounded. We should call the Coast Guard ourselves.’

Hewett gives her a pitying look. ‘The authorities can’t help us, Prefe
would just put them in danger, too. Finish your modifications and start
engines. The *Aronnax* will not be far behind.’

Tia doesn’t look happy about it, but she hurries off to comply.

House Orca has their healing work cut out for them. Meadow, Eloise
Cooper and Robbie Barr all suffered flesh wounds from miniature harp
Franklin thinks they’ll be okay, but they’ll need stitches.

‘Completely unnecessary,’ he complains, holding up one of the six-i
hooked projectiles. ‘If you’re going to shock somebody unconscious, w
spear them, too?’

I don’t have an answer. The fact that Land Institute would develop a
Leyden gun that causes unnecessary pain doesn’t surprise me, though.

The rest of our crew suffered only minor injuries. Franklin urges me
to the sickbay so he can run some tests, make sure the poison is really

my system. I assure him I'm fine.

He doesn't believe me. Neither do Nelinha and Ester, but the last thi want is to be confined in a small room belowdecks, attached to a buncl monitors. I need open air and the sea. I need to watch Socrates swimm alongside our boat, happily chattering at me. After everything else that happened today, my abduction has left me trembling with shock, terro shame and rage. Sea-snake venom isn't the only poison I'm trying to f out of my system.

The Cephalopods run around finishing Dr Hewett's alt-tech modific The pulse-dispersion unit is installed to block radar and sonar. Projecti modules are fixed around the hull for dynamic camouflage. From the r where I'm standing, I can't see any difference in the ship's appearance the Cephalopods look excited. They talk to one another breathlessly ab specs and parameters like they're discussing magic spells.

'Can you believe this?' Nelinha grins at me as she passes by. Gettin zapped by Dru's gun hasn't slowed her down at all. If anything, it seen have charged her batteries. Her smile fades, however, when I don't res She rests a hand briefly on my shoulder. 'You sure you're okay, babe?

Then her housemate Kay calls, 'Oh, no way. Look at these phased-c reaction times!'

And Nelinha is off.

She is the most caring friend you could ever want, but you have to a that sometimes you'll take a back seat to shiny new tech.

In a matter of minutes, the *Varuna* is underway.

We head due west. Socrates keeps pace with us easily. He and I talk we can, but as usual it's all questions and no answers.

I wish I knew how he found me, and whether he understands that D gone. He can't tell me these things.

No, that's not correct. I know enough about dolphin intelligence and communication to know he is absolutely capable of telling me. Dolphi language is infinitely more complex and nuanced than human languag just that I can't understand him well enough.

'Thank you,' I say to him, also using sign language to make my poi visual. 'I wish I could repay you.'

He gives me his sideways dolphin smile. I imagine he's saying, *Yes, owe me all the squid.*

A voice behind me says, 'I got upstaged by a dolphin.'

Gemini Twain leans against a capstan. His arms are crossed, his exp
glum. His dark hair is flecked with sea salt.

'My one job was to protect you,' he tells me. 'I'm sorry.'

I'm tempted to snap *I don't need a protector.* But he looks so depres
don't have the heart for it.

'Don't beat yourself up, Miles Morales,' I say.

Gem laughs under his breath. 'Easier said than done.'

He pulls at his collar like he's wearing a tie that's too tight.

I don't know much about him. After his altercation with Nelinha du
our chum year, I decided I didn't want to deal with him any more than
to. I guess Harding-Pencroft hasn't always been easy for him, either. H
only Latter-day Saint at HP, as far as I know. How does a Black Morm
from landlocked Utah get interested in a career at sea? I've never aske
I hope we'll get more chances to talk – not because I like him, or beca
feel like I *have* to like him, but because he's a classmate. Today I was
reminded that anyone in my life can be taken away in the span of a hea

'What did you see,' I ask him, 'when you looked at Dr Hewett's tab

He frowns. 'A dark shape under the water. Like a massive arrowhea

'The *Aronnax*,' I guess. 'Some kind of submarine?'

Gem scans the horizon. 'Not like any I've ever heard of. If that's wh
attacked HP, and it's after us …'

He leaves the thought unfinished. Any vessel that can destroy a squa
mile of the California coast is not something we can fight in the *Varun*
with assault rifles, zappy guns and a luchador dolphin. If we can't go t
authorities, which Hewett seems adamant about, then our only hope is
and hide. That leads me to an uneasy question: run and hide *where*?

Ester strolls over with Top at her heels and a dead squid in her hand
Without preamble, she hands me the squid, which is both warm and ic
extremely gross.

'I found it in the freezer,' she says. 'I put it in the microwave for six
seconds. I didn't do it any longer because I didn't want it to get too squ
mean, it's a squid, so it's already squishy.'

She says all this without a pause and without meeting my eyes. Of c
she's just trying to make me feel better. She knew I would want to giv
Socrates a treat, and she found just the thing.

I've heard 'experts' say that autistic people have trouble with empat
sometimes I wonder if these experts have ever actually sat down and ta

pression autistic people. When we first met, I didn't understand why Ester woul
say something comforting when one of us was upset. I found her behav
complex code, like jumbled words and signals. But once I cracked that
ssed I realized that she just does things a little differently. She's more likely t
something nice, or offer an explanation, as a way of helping me feel be
She is, in fact, one of the most empathetic people I've ever met.

Top sits at my feet and wags his tail. He gives me his most soulful s
I'm a very good boy. I almost killed someone earlier.

ring 'He's already had tons of treats,' Ester assures me. 'The squid is for
I had Socrates.'
He's the 'As long as it's not for me,' Gem says.
ion kid 'That was a joke,' Ester says, her expression deadly serious. 'I get it
d. Now 'This is wonderful,' I tell Ester. 'Thank you.'
use I I throw the squid to Socrates, who snaps it up eagerly. I wish I coul
it down to him and feed him by hand, but we're moving at a fast clip n
artbeat. and so is he. I know he can easily keep pace with our boat, but I'm not
let?' whether he'll follow us or not. Dolphins have their own priorities.
d.' 'He can rest on board if he gets tired,' Ester tells me.

It takes me a second to process that sentence. 'What do you mean *o*
hat *board*?'

'Have you seen the captain's room?' she asks. 'Harding-Pencroft ha
are always had dolphin friends. It's like Top.' She scratches his ear. 'Ther
a, even always been a Top at Harding-Pencroft. I mean, before Harding-Pencr
o the destroyed.'
to run I don't quite understand what she means about Top and the dolphins
always being at HP, but when she mentions the school's destruction, sh
. agitated again. She starts tapping her fingertips on her thighs. The volu
y – and her voice goes up several notches.

'ANYWAY, I CAME TO GET YOU,' she says.
ty-five 'I – Okay. What's up?'
ishy. I I'm not sure I want to know. It has been a very long day already.

'Dr Hewett wants to see you two on the forward deck,' Ester tells us
ourse, not well. I'm not an expert, but I would say he has diabetes and probab
e additional underlying condition.'

Gem and I glance at each other uneasily. The idea that Hewett is ill
hy, but surprise me. He has looked awful since … well, always. Ester doesn't
alked tomuch of a bedside manner, but I trust her instincts. She once announce

ldn’t loudly in the middle of lunch that my monthly cramps might not be so
viour a horrible if I increased my intake of vitamin B1. For the record, she was
: code I ‘Okay,’ I say. ‘Is that why he wants to see us? Because he’s ill?’
:o *do* ‘No,’ Ester says. ‘I just thought about it, so I said it. He wants to see
etter. because the prisoner is starting to talk.’ She looks at her palms. ‘Also,
squid slime on me. I’m going to go wash my hands because that seems
tare. the right thing to do.’

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loudly in the middle of lunch that my monthly cramps might not be so horrible if I increased my intake of vitamin B1. For the record, she was right.

‘Okay,’ I say. ‘Is that why he wants to see us? Because he’s ill?’

‘No,’ Ester says. ‘I just thought about it, so I said it. He wants to see you because the prisoner is starting to talk.’ She looks at her palms. ‘Also, I have squid slime on me. I’m going to go wash my hands because that seems like the right thing to do.’



CHAPTER TWELVE

Caleb South is zip-tied to a metal folding chair. His wrists are bound b
him, his ankles fastened to the chair legs.

When I see him, my anger tries to harden into a suit of armour, but I
exhausted it's more like a worn-out sleep shirt. It keeps falling away,
stretching into an amorphous mass of grief and shock.

Caleb is still in his wetsuit. His mask and hood have been removed,
revealing close-set brown eyes and a wedge of blond hair tinged green
chlorine. His broken nose is swelling up nicely. Blood has crusted on h
upper lip.

He's been positioned facing west, so he has to squint into the sun
whenever he looks up at Dr Hewett. Dru and Kiya, brandishing their n
Leyden guns, stand to either side of the captive. Kiya still looks grump
getting electrocuted. Behind Dr Hewett stands Linzi Huang, one of the

I'm relieved to see Linzi. It means Dr Hewett is still following stand
procedures. An Orca is supposed to be present at all important negotiat
Aside from being the school's medics, they're our recorders and witne
our school conscience. Having them around tends to keep everybody e
good behaviour. I don't really think any of my classmates would do
something like beat up a prisoner to get information, but, after what we
been through, nerves are frayed. Tempers are high.

Considering Caleb's broken nose and the fact that he was recently b
slammed by a dolphin, he looks pretty good. The only torture he's end
Harding-Pencroft's trademark form of humiliation. Around his biceps
children's inflatable water wings, bright yellow with pink duckies. A

matching inner tube circles his waist. This is how upperclassmen treat year kids who prove inept at their assignments. They're forced to wear duckies for an entire day. Many kids never get over the shame. Why w some inflatables on board, I'm not sure, but I'm also not surprised.

Caleb scowls when he sees me, but he offers no snide comments. Th duckies must have broken his spirit.

Hewett leans towards the prisoner. 'Mr South, tell Miss – tell Prefec Dakkar what you told me.'

Caleb curls his lip. 'This boat is going to end up at the bottom of the

'Not that part,' Hewett says wearily. 'The *other* part.'

'The *Aronnax* is coming.'

'Your submarine,' I say, remembering my conversation with Gem.

Caleb lets out a broken laugh. 'The *Aronnax* is a submarine the way Lamborghini is an economy car. But yes, genius, it's our ship. You've maybe an hour if you're lucky. They sent us to take you alive …' He s flake of dried blood from his lip. 'Since we failed and never reported i they'll follow. They'll torpedo this hunk of junk and confirm the kill afterwards.'

Confirm the kill.

I feel a coldness in my belly that's as sharp as the edge of a fillet kn wonder if the *Aronnax* crew talked about Dev and me this way before destroyed our school, as if we were nothing more than impersonal targ

I want to slap him. I hold back the urge. Linzi's presence is a calmi reminder: *That is not who we are. We don't stoop to their level.*

'Why the attack?' I ask Caleb. 'Why me? And why did they send a l of students who couldn't do the job?'

He shakes his head in disgust. 'You just got lucky with that stupid d LI doesn't *coddle* their students the way HP does. Destroying HP …' I gives me a bloodstained grin. 'That was our senior project, and I'd say aced it.'

Dru steps forward, raising the butt of his Leyden gun, but Gem stop with a stern look.

Caleb watches the exchange with obvious amusement. 'As for *why* Ana Dakkar … You *really* don't know anything, do you?' He glances Hewett. 'I guess the professor hasn't told you the truth about HP. Were even trained in Leyden guns until today? Did you even know they exis

An uncomfortable ripple goes through our group.

‘That’s what I thought,’ Caleb says. ‘At LI, we aren’t afraid to *use* o knowledge. How many world problems could you cowards have solve you just *shared*?’

Behind me, Gem says, ‘Shared what, exactly?’

‘You had *two years*.’ Caleb sounds bitter, even regretful. ‘You coul cooperated with us. You could have negotiated.’

I can’t tell if the ship is pitching or if it’s my own lack of equilibriur *years* since my parents’ death. Two years Hewett has been fearing an a Two years in which Caleb says Harding-Pencroft could have negotiate

I fix my eyes on Dr Hewett. ‘What happened two years ago?’

His gaze is sadder than Top’s when he begs for dog biscuits. ‘We w that conversation soon, my dear. I promise.’

Caleb snorts. ‘You aren’t really stupid enough to believe Hewett’s promises, are you? He promised us a bunch of stuff, too, when he was

Hewett’s knuckles whiten as he clenches his fists. ‘That’s enough, M South.’

‘Professor, how about you tell them what you were working on for I when I was a freshman?’ Caleb suggests. ‘Before you lost your nerve. them who had the idea for the *Aronnax*.’

He might as well have thrown another flash-bang grenade. My skull like a struck bell.

Gem takes a sharp breath. ‘Professor, what is he talking about?’

Hewett looks more annoyed than ashamed. ‘I did many things I was proud of at LI, Prefect Twain, before I knew what they were capable o returns his glare to our prisoner. ‘And today, Mr South, Land Institute why they can *never* be trusted with advanced technology. You destroy noble institution.’

‘Noble institution? You were protecting the legacy of an outlaw.’ Ca squirms in his pink-ducky inner tube. ‘If you’re going to kill me, go ah and do it. This thing is uncomfortable.’

Dru and Kiya stare coldly at Dr Hewett. Even Linzi looks shaken. M like me, they didn’t know before today that Hewett once worked at La Institute. But it’s worse than that. Dr Hewett had the idea for the *Aron* helped create the weapon that destroyed our school and killed my brot

‘We don’t execute prisoners,’ Hewett announces. ‘Dru, Kiya, throw overboard.’

Caleb’s arrogant expression crumbles. ‘Hold on –’

‘Sir,’ Linzi protests.

‘He’ll be fine,’ Hewett assures her. ‘He has his buoyancy-control ve wetsuit, his water wings. Guards, proceed.’

Dru and Kiya look like they’re tempted to dump the professor instea after a glance at Gemini Twain, the Sharks follow orders. They untie C from his chair, then drag him thrashing and cursing to the port side anc him into the sea.

My last glimpse of my ex-abductor is his blond head bobbing up anc in our wake, spluttering and yelling unkind things about Harding-Penc imagine he’ll be picked up by someone soon enough. He’s loud. Also, pink-ducky floaties make him easily the most colourful thing off the S Alejandro coast.

‘Miss Huang,’ Hewett says, ‘report to the bridge. Maintain our cour west at maximum speed.’

Linzi stirs. ‘Sir, we deserve –’

‘You’ll get your explanations,’ Hewett promises. ‘But first things fi Double-check the camouflage projectors and pulse-dispersion unit. Ha Orcas sweep the ship for any tracking devices. We *must* get away from *Aronnax*.’ He turns towards me. ‘As for you, Ana Dakkar, you’re com with me. I think it’s about time you gave us a course heading.’

‘Sir,’ Linzi protests.

‘He’ll be fine,’ Hewett assures her. ‘He has his buoyancy-control vest, his wetsuit, his water wings. Guards, proceed.’

Dru and Kiya look like they’re tempted to dump the professor instead, but, after a glance at Gemini Twain, the Sharks follow orders. They untie Caleb from his chair, then drag him thrashing and cursing to the port side and chuck him into the sea.

My last glimpse of my ex-abductor is his blond head bobbing up and down in our wake, spluttering and yelling unkind things about Harding-Pencroft. I imagine he’ll be picked up by someone soon enough. He’s loud. Also, his pink-ducky floaties make him easily the most colourful thing off the San Alejandro coast.

‘Miss Huang,’ Hewett says, ‘report to the bridge. Maintain our course due west at maximum speed.’

Linzi stirs. ‘Sir, we deserve –’

‘You’ll get your explanations,’ Hewett promises. ‘But first things first. Double-check the camouflage projectors and pulse-dispersion unit. Have the Orcas sweep the ship for any tracking devices. We *must* get away from the *Aronnax*.’ He turns towards me. ‘As for you, Ana Dakkar, you’re coming with me. I think it’s about time you gave us a course heading.’



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

On the way, I grab Nelinha and drag her along.

I need a friend at my side, even if she has to coexist with Gem for a
I'm still reeling from … well, everything. I didn't like Caleb's warning
don't understand why Dr Hewett thinks I'm the one who should decide
course heading. Why does he keep singling me out like this? *He's* the
with all the secrets. And I'm still not sure I trust Gemini Twain to have
back.

At the end of the corridor, Hewett opens the door to the captain's ca
I've never been inside before. The place is massive: a full-size bed aga
port wall, windows overlooking the bow, a big conference table, and o
starboard side …

I gasp. '*Socrates!*'

The entire starboard side of the room is an open saltwater tank. The
Plexiglas wall is maybe twelve feet long, five feet high, curved inward
top to prevent the water from sloshing out when the ship moves. The ta
isn't big enough for the dolphin to live in, but there's enough room for
splash around, turn and float comfortably. On either side is an underwa
metal flap that reminds me of a giant pet door. I don't quite understand
the tank was engineered, but the chutes must connect to the open sea,
allowing Socrates to come and go as he pleases.

Socrates pokes his head over the lip of the Plexiglas. This puts him a
level with me. He chatters happily. I give him a hug and kiss him right
beak. I realize I'm smiling for the first time since the school's destruct

'I don't understand,' I say. 'How did you even find us?'

Hewett answers for him. ‘Your dolphin friend knows this boat well. has cultivated friendships with many of his family over the years. Socr did you call him?’

‘I … Yes.’ I was about to explain that Dev and I dive with Socrates morning, but remembering that ritual is like walking barefoot over bro glass.

‘An appropriate name,’ says Hewett. ‘Well, Socrates knows he alwa a berth on the *Varuna* if he wants to travel with us. Now come here, M Dakkar. Look at this.’

Again with the *Miss*. This is how they wear you down: they just kee making the same ‘oopsie’, hoping that you’ll eventually get tired of ca them on it.

‘Prefect,’ I grumble, but Hewett has already turned his attention to t conference table, where Gem and Nelinha have joined him.

I guess they don’t consider the bottlenose dolphin in the stateroom a deal. Reluctantly, I go and sit down with my fellow humans.

Spread across the table is a nautical map of the Pacific. In some resp it’s old-fashioned. The names are in fancy calligraphy. The compass ro elaborately coloured. Illustrated sea monsters writhe in the corners.

However, the map is made of a material I’ve never seen before. It’s grey, almost translucent, and perfectly smooth like it’s never been fold The ink shimmers. If I look at it sideways, all the markings seem to disappear. I don’t want to think this with Socrates in the room, but the reminds me of dolphin skin. Maybe, like the calcium carbonate of the projectiles, it has been organically ‘secreted’ in a lab somehow.

Oh, great. My thought process is spiralling down the alt-tech rabbit

Sitting on top of the map is a coppery dome-shaped paperweight thi least, in a normal world, it would be a paperweight. Its curved surface laced with intricate wires. At the apex is a smooth, round indentation. like the eye of a steampunk robot. I really hope it doesn’t open and sta me.

Hewett eases himself into the chair across the table. He mops his bro with a handkerchief. I remember what Ester said: *Diabetes. Underlyin condition.* Hewett has never been my favourite teacher. I don’t trust hi Still, I’m worried about his health. He is literally the only adult in the r and the only one who might be able to give me answers.

Nelinha stands on my right, Gem on my left. They studiously avoid looking at each other. Socrates chatters and splashes in his tank.

Hewett picks up the paperweight. He leans across the table and sets the centre of the map, like he's calling my bet in a poker game.

'I won't ask you to do this until you feel comfortable,' he says. 'But the only way forward.'

I look more closely at the object. That indentation at the top …

'It's a thumbprint reader,' I guess. 'I put my thumb on it and … wha shows us a location on the map?'

Hewett smiles faintly. 'It's a genetic reader, actually. Keyed to your family's DNA. But, yes, you have deduced its purpose.'

I'm starting to deduce *my* purpose, too – why Hewett and Caleb Sou talk about me like a commodity. I'm putting together the broken piece this horrible day, and I don't like what it's showing me.

I try to pick around the edges of my real question. 'So, Jules Verne say he interviewed actual people.'

Hewett nods. '*20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*. *The Mysterious Islan* foundational texts are based on real events.'

A weight grows in my stomach. 'Foundational texts … You make th sound sacred.'

'Hardly,' Hewett scoffs. 'They are novelizations. Misrepresentation at their core they contain truths. Ned Land was a real Canadian master harpooner. Professor Pierre Aronnax was a French marine biologist.'

'Ned Land … Land Institute,' Nelinha says.

'And *Aronnax*,' Gem chimes in. 'That's the name of the sub.'

Hewett is silent long enough to tap each of his fingertips against the 'Yes. Land and Aronnax, along with the professor's manservant, Cons were the only survivors of a doomed naval expedition. In the 1860s, th joined the search for a supposed sea monster … a creature that was sin ships across the globe. Their expeditionary vessel, the *Abraham Linco* lost somewhere in the Pacific. Over a year later, Land, Aronnax and C were found, inexplicably, in a small lifeboat off the coast of Norway.'

I find myself leaning forward. I know the plot of *20,000 Leagues U the Sea.* But now it seems more like a prophecy … one that predicts an apocalypse. I don't like apocalypses.

'No one believed the story they told about their lost year,' Hewett continues. 'They were dismissed as madmen. I doubt even Jules Verne

believed them, but he *did* listen. Several years later, after Verne's nove
became famous, he was approached by a different group of men. These
former castaways who had survived on a desert island in the Pacific. T
claimed they'd had an encounter similar to the one described in *20,000*
Leagues. They wanted to correct what they called inaccuracies in Verne
account. Verne's subsequent novel, *The Mysterious Island*, was based
interviews with *those* men.'

'Cyrus Harding and Bonaventure Pencroft.' My mind is racing, conn
dots I do not want connected. 'The founders of our school. Just like Ne
Land founded Land Institute.'

Nelinha raises one eyebrow at Hewett. It's the same expression she
when she wants to tell the mean sophomore girls to back off or they'll
butt-kicking.

'If all that's true,' she says, 'you're telling us the main dude was rea
Nemo.'

'That's correct, Miss da Silva.'

'And we're not talking about the cartoon fish,' she adds.

Somebody had to say it.

Hewett rubs his face. 'No, Miss da Silva. The *main dude* was not a c
fish. Nor was he the fictional character from Jules Verne's books after
that fish was named. Captain Nemo was a real nineteenth-century pers
genius who created marine technologies generations ahead of their tim
most important and powerful advances were keyed to Nemo's own boo
chemistry … what we today call *DNA*. He and his descendants were th
ones who could operate his greatest inventions.'

That's it. I sit down. I don't trust my legs to hold me any longer.

'Ester is descended from Cyrus Harding,' I say.

Hewett stares at me, waiting. His expression is a mixture of sympath
cold analytical interest, like a TV-show cop in a morgue, about to uncc
murder victim for the next-of-kin to identify.

'And Captain Nemo …' I say. 'That wasn't his real name. It was Pri
Dakkar. An Indian noble. From Bundelkhand.'

'Yes, Miss Dakkar,' Hewett agrees. 'As of today, you are his only
surviving direct descendant. This makes you quite literally the most
important person in the world.'

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

‘Nope.’

Honestly, it’s the only answer I can muster. ‘You are *not* telling me our school was destroyed, my brother was killed and Land Institute trie kidnap me because I am descended from a fictional character.’

‘Not fictional,’ Hewett says again, his voice strained. ‘Prince Dakka your fourth great-grandfather.’

‘I agree with Ana,’ Nelinha says. ‘This is crazy.’

Gem sets his Leyden gun on the table. ‘We’ve got evidence.’

Nelinha waves off the gun, or maybe she’s just waving off Gem. ‘Y electroplated zapper is cool. That doesn’t mean Jules Verne wrote non fiction. I could reverse-engineer a Leyden gun if I had enough time.’

‘Which is exactly what Harding-Pencroft did,’ Dr Hewett says. ‘An Institute, unfortunately. But Nemo’s greatest innovations –’

‘Wait.’ I raise my hands like I’m trying to hold all of this new inforr together, but I’m failing badly. ‘You’ve reverse-engineered super Tase You’ve got dynamic camouflage and radar blocking that’s better than military-grade. This is all from a guy who lived a hundred and fifty ye ago.’

Hewett gives me the sort of expectant nod he uses in his classroom, telling me *Go on. You are not entirely stupid.*

‘Then what do you need me for?’

Hewett winces. I get the feeling he wishes he *didn’t* need me.

‘Miss – Prefect Dakkar,’ he says, seeing the intensity of my scowl, ‘ last one hundred and fifty years, we have succeeded in re-creating only

of your ancestor's scientific advances. We have been like children play dress-up in the great man's clothes. Most of his work, I'm sorry to say, beyond our reach.'

'And you think I can change that?' I laugh, though there is nothing f about it. Behind me, Socrates chatters in response. 'Professor, I don't h any family secrets.'

'No,' he agrees. 'That was part of Nemo's plan.'

Gem sits down next to me. His hand curls around the barrel of the L gun. 'Nemo's plan?'

Hewett inhales, as if preparing himself for his final lecture. 'Only tw times did outsiders meet Captain Nemo and live to tell the tale. The fir –'

'Was Land and Aronnax,' Nelinha says. 'The bad guys.'

Hewett musters a weary smile. 'Yes, Miss da Silva. They would not course, call themselves *bad guys*. They fled from Nemo's sub, the *Nau* convinced that they had barely escaped the world's most dangerous madman.'

'An outlaw,' I remember. 'Caleb said we were protecting the legacy outlaw.'

'Yes,' Hewett says. 'And Nemo *was* a bitter, dangerous outlaw. He the great colonial powers. He sank their ships across the globe, hoping wreck their trade and bring them to their knees.'

Gem frowns. 'So … nice guy.'

'A brilliant scientist,' Hewett counters, 'who had personal reasons to imperialism.' He hesitates, as if weighing whether or not he wants to te about yet another family tragedy. 'During the Indian Rebellion of 1857 Prince Dakkar stood up against the British. In response, the British des his principality and killed his wife and elder son. After that, Dakkar we hiding, eventually becoming Captain Nemo. You, Ana, are descended his younger son, his only living heir.'

Nobody says anything for a minute. Even though the tragedy happer generations ago, I feel a familiar aching emptiness inside me, as if Ner wife and child were two more people I lost when HP crumbled into the

Finally Nelinha mutters an unkind comment in Portuguese about wh imperialists can do with their national flags.

As far as I know, Dr Hewett doesn't speak Portuguese, but he seems understand the sentiment. He nods in sympathy.

‘At any rate,’ he says, ‘when Ned Land and Pierre Aronnax escaped *Nautilus*, they were terrified by the captain’s rage and power. They ma their lives’ work to save the reigning world order from his agenda. The decided they could only do that by re-creating or stealing Nemo’s tech by whatever means necessary, claiming his power for themselves.’

Nelinha studies her nails, chipped from a hard day’s work braining enemies with her socket wrench. ‘So that’s where Land Institute came Like I said, the *bad guys*. They want to save the world order. What doe make us – the good-guy outlaws?’ She arches her eyebrows. ‘For the r I’m okay with that.’

‘I’m so glad,’ Hewett says dryly. ‘As Prefect Dakkar deduced, our s was founded by the second group who encountered Nemo – the one le Cyrus Harding and Bonaventure Pencroft. They had the good fortune becoming stranded on an island that happened to be one of the captain secret bases. He helped them survive and eventually escape.’

‘He had a lot of secret bases?’ Gem asks, like he’s always wanted o

‘A dozen that we know of,’ Hewett says. ‘Perhaps more. Anyway, b time Harding and Pencroft met Nemo, he was a different man. His pers tragedies had left him broken and disillusioned. Despite being a genius despite possessing the most powerful submarine ever built, he had fail make any real change in the world … Or so he believed.’

‘He died in his sub.’ I didn’t realize how much I remembered about *Mysterious Island*. I guess it feels different now, knowing that this guy my blood as well as my name. ‘Nemo helped the castaways escape. Th sank the *Nautilus* in a subterranean lagoon or something, right before t island went up in a big volcanic explosion. The sub was his tomb.’

I can see the goosebumps ripple across Nelinha’s arms. For a genius engineer, she is pretty superstitious. Ghosts, dead people, tombs – that totally freaks her out. ‘There wasn’t anything in that book about Hardi Pencroft starting a school,’ she says.

‘Of course not,’ Hewett says. ‘The only reason Harding and Pencrof to Jules Verne was to change the public narrative. For our purposes, if *did* begin to suspect that Captain Nemo was real, it was much better if never saw him as a threat. By the end of his life, Nemo had given up h for vengeance. And, yes, he did die aboard the *Nautilus*, which was supposedly demolished in the destruction of his island.’

‘*Our purposes*,’ Gem says. ‘What are those?’

Hewett gestures at the map. ‘Just before Nemo died, he pulled Cyrus Harding aside and had some final words with him. It says that much in Verne’s book. What it does *not* say is that Nemo gave Harding a treasure chest of pearls and also entrusted him with a mission: to make sure his technology was never used by the world powers or stolen by Land Institute. We were to safeguard Nemo’s legacy, to reveal his advances only a little at a time, when we decided the world was ready for them. Most importantly, he looks at me – ‘we were to safeguard his descendants until the time was right.’

I don’t want to ask, but I do anyway. ‘Right for what?’

Again, Dr Hewett simply watches me, waiting for the hints to fall in place.

‘This map leads to one of Nemo’s bases,’ I say, getting goosebumps more than Nelinha’s. ‘Not just any base. The island where Nemo died. It was completely destroyed in the eruption, was it?’

Hewett gives me his rarest classroom gesture. He simply points at me. I say *Correct.* ‘Ana, two years ago, your parents gave their lives to find the island. Your brother was being prepared to take charge of operations there once he graduated college. Since we discovered it, the island has become a field lab and underwater archaeology site staffed by HP faculty. It holds the most advanced technology. And … artefacts.’

Gem rubs his forehead. ‘That’s what Land Institute wants. Access to the island. And you … you used to work for LI.’ He sounds personally hurt. ‘I shared Hewett has broken a promise.

Hewett stares at the nautical map. ‘That’s true, Mr Twain. When I was younger, I graduated from HP – House Shark, like you and Dev Dakkar. Nevertheless, I always had a grudging admiration for Land Institute. They favour action over caution, offence over defence. That was alluring to me. In some ways, they are a school made entirely of Sharks. That’s why I accepted a job there, and why I spent years designing specs for a submarine that could rival the *Nautilus*. It took me a long time to see the ugly, brutal side of their quest for progress, to realize what they would do with such power …’

He gives me a mournful glance. ‘I don’t expect you to trust me. But my past with LI is one reason I wanted to be Dev’s advisor. I tried to guide him, to teach him why HP’s approach is the only responsible way forward. Dev reminded me so much of myself at his age …’

If I wasn’t so shocked, I might be tempted to laugh. I can’t imagine two people *less* alike than Dev and Dr Hewett. It’s hard to envision Hewett

Shark, or young, or anything other than our professor. But it makes me wonder what Dev might have accomplished when he got older. Would have gone on to command his own ship and then his own fleet as he'd dreamed? Or is it possible he would have ended up a frustrated, dejecte teacher like Hewett? That idea is almost as sad as knowing that, now, h will never get the chance to have any future at all.

Hewett sighs, as if thinking the same thoughts. 'At any rate … when parents found Nemo's base, Land Institute feared it would give HP an unstoppable advantage. As I said, Nemo's most important work could operated by his descendants. And, unlike Land Institute, we have … go relations with the Dakkar family.'

I get the uncomfortable sense that Hewett almost said *we have contr the Dakkar family*. He doesn't seem to notice the cold look I'm giving

'The island is completely off the grid,' he says, some colour coming into his face. 'It is cut off from all outside communication. Its location unknown even to me. The only way to find it –'

'Is me.' I look at the coppery paperweight thing.

'Exactly, my dear. The base is our only hope. The staff there won't k about HP's destruction. We must warn them. We can regroup there, re ourselves, protect –'

'We could just go to the authorities,' I say. 'We *have* been attacked. school has been destroyed. We tell –'

'Who?' Hewett demands. 'The police? The FBI? The military? Best scenario, they write us off as lunatics. Worst-case scenario, they *believ* Are you prepared to be whisked off to a secret government site and spe rest of your days being interrogated? Land Institute and Harding-Pencr agree on almost nothing. But we *do* agree on one thing. Turning Nemo technology over to the world's governments or, worse, the world's corporations would be disastrous. We must –'

He slumps forward like he's been punched.

Gem shoots to his feet. 'Professor?'

'I'm fine,' he wheezes. 'Just overtaxed myself.'

I exchange a glance with Nelinha. *Yeah, that's a total lie.*

'Prefect Twain,' Hewett gasps, 'some assistance, please.'

Gem seems relieved to have something to do. He grabs Hewett's arr helps him up.

‘I’ll leave you for now, Prefect Dakkar,’ Hewett says. ‘Take some ti
think. Our course of action will be up to you. We will follow your orde
I stare at him. *Follow my orders?* The idea terrifies me.
‘But … you’re leaving?’ I stammer. ‘This is your cabin.’
‘Oh, no,’ Hewett says. ‘It’s yours. I *did* say you’re the most importa
person on the planet, so suffice it to say you’re also the most important
person on this ship. We will talk again in the morning. Mr Twain, if yo
help me to the bridge …’
Before they reach the door, I call, ‘Sir.’
Hewett turns.
‘You mentioned artefacts …’ I don’t want to continue, but I force m
to. ‘You said Nemo’s sub was *supposedly* demolished. What my paren
trying to find –’
‘They succeeded, Ana,’ he tells me, his voice wistful, like he’s talki
about Santa Claus. ‘After four generations of fruitless searching, your
succeeded. They discovered the wreck of the *Nautilus*.’

‘I’ll leave you for now, Prefect Dakkar,’ Hewett says. ‘Take some time to think. Our course of action will be up to you. We will follow your orders.’

I stare at him. *Follow my orders?* The idea terrifies me.

‘But … you’re leaving?’ I stammer. ‘This is your cabin.’

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Before they reach the door, I call, ‘Sir.’

Hewett turns.

‘You mentioned artefacts …’ I don’t want to continue, but I force myself to. ‘You said Nemo’s sub was *supposedly* demolished. What my parents died trying to find –’

‘They succeeded, Ana,’ he tells me, his voice wistful, like he’s talking about Santa Claus. ‘After four generations of fruitless searching, your parents succeeded. They discovered the wreck of the *Nautilus*.’



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

What do you do with that information?

You're now the most important person in the world. You have to de the fate of your friends and classmates. By the way, your parents died the discovery of a make-believe super sub from the 1800s.

Me … I call for a slumber party.

I ask Ester and Nelinha if they'll bunk with me in the captain's cabi don't want to be alone in that huge room, even if I do have my teddy d Socrates. I want Ester's reassuring *puff-puff-snore* nearby, and the rust Nelinha's satin hair bonnet whenever she turns her head on her pillow. Top's warm doggy smell and his contented sighs as he curls up at Este feet.

Once we've settled in for the night, Gemini Twain checks on me on time. He tells me that the bridge is maintaining a general westerly cou until I say otherwise. He will check back with us in the morning.

'Okay,' I say. 'Thanks. Goodnight.'

Gem gives me an uneasy look. Maybe he sees me differently now th knows I'm related to a famous outlaw/madman/genius/submarine capt maybe he's contemplating sleeping outside our door all night in case someone else tries to kidnap me. I hope it's the former.

Nelinha and Ester insist that I take the bed. They are happy with the bedrolls. I figure we'll stay up talking for hours. This day has been a s crater of misery. My mind is racing, and I have so many emotions to p How could I possibly sleep? But, as soon as I lie down on that comfy f size mattress, exhaustion kicks in. My body says, *Nope, you're done, g* And I pass out.

I always sleep well at sea.

That night I have vivid, fragmented dreams, mostly about smells. A temple, sandalwood incense clings to my mother's sari as she hugs me laughing at some silly joke I've made. We stand together in the kitche during Holi, watching pastries bake in the oven. My mouth waters fro maddeningly delicious scents of cardamom, khoya and coconut. Then father is carrying a very small me. I pretend to remain asleep so I can e the feel of my cheek pressed against the warm crook of his neck. His c scented aftershave makes me think of pumpkin pie. Then my brother i holding my hand as he walks me home after a fistfight in elementary s He's really not much older than me, but he seems so mature. Dev's vo soothing but also deeply offended. He tells me other people are stupid respect me. I am brilliant and powerful and deserve the world. My bus mouth tastes of copper. We walk past the honeysuckle blooming at the our block. From then on, the sweet smell of honeysuckle will always n me happy. It makes me want to hit Maddy White on the playground al again, just so my brother will compliment me and walk me home.

I wake to the sound of voices. Ester and Nelinha are standing over n having a hushed argument. Somehow, I've slept through them getting hitting the showers and getting dressed. Outside, it's daylight. Socrate giant aquatic hamster tube is empty. He must be out hunting for breakf can't remember the last time I slept past dawn.

Nelinha notices my eyes are open. 'Hey, babe. How are you feeling?'

I prop myself up on my elbows.

Top rests his chin on my leg and gives me his *Get up!* grunt. Everyb a critic.

I guess yesterday really happened. Harding-Pencroft is gone. Dev is I'm at sea … literally and emotionally. How do I feel?

'I – I'm awake,' I decide. 'What's going on?'

Nelinha gives Ester a cautionary look, like, *Remember what we talk about.*

'The good news is he's not dead,' Ester says.

Nelinha throws her hands in the air. 'Ester …'

'Well, you told me to start with the good news,' Ester protests. 'Tha good news. He isn't dead. Not yet.'

'Who …?' A spark of hope flickers through my still-groggy mind. F a second, I wonder if she could mean Dev. But Ester doesn't let me dr

‘Dr Hewett,’ she blurts out. ‘Franklin found him unresponsive in his cabin.’

Dread washes through me.

‘Show me.’ My body somehow manages to find more adrenalin. I’m in my cotton shorts and sleep shirt, but I don’t care. My heart pounds a hurry down the corridor.

Gemini Twain guards the door to the sickbay. He looks as if he hasn all night. Inside, Franklin Couch and Linzi Huang stand on either side Hewett, who lies unconscious on a hospital bed. He’s hooked to an IV several monitors. The straps of his oxygen mask make his grey hair bri like the fins of a lionfish. I’m no medic, but his vitals don’t look good displays. Top finds the sickbay smells very interesting … until Linzi sl him away.

Linzi’s eyes are bloodshot, and a surgical mask hangs from her right ‘We ran the most comprehensive blood panel we could with our onboa equipment. His liver function and complete blood count are both off. B sugar is high. Our best guess is late-stage cancer, maybe pancreatic, wi type-two diabetes, but we’re not set up for advanced diagnostics, much treatment. He needs immediate medical help.’

‘Except *Gemini* here,’ Franklin growls, ‘won’t let us put out an SOS

‘The professor’s orders.’ Gemini’s voice cracks on the word *profess* ‘Complete radio silence no matter what. If Land Institute finds us …’

He doesn’t need to remind me of Caleb South’s warning. The *Aronn* send us all to the bottom of the sea. In the last twenty-four hours, I’ve lot of things I had trouble believing. Caleb’s threat wasn’t one of them

Hewett’s face is a map of pale blue veins and liver spots. I want to c him for having medical issues *now*. He should have taken better care o himself. But, of course, that isn’t fair of me to think.

What would Hewett want me to do? I know the answer. Keep going this secret base. But how far would that be? And is it worth him dying

‘Can you keep him alive?’ I ask Linzi and Franklin.

Franklin shrugs helplessly. ‘We’re *freshmen*, Ana. We’ve had medic training, but –’

‘IF IT’S LATE-STAGE PANCREATIC CANCER,’ Ester breaks in making everyone except Hewett jump, ‘his survival odds are bad no m what. Even a state-of-the-art hospital won’t be able to do much for him

Her blunt bedside manner makes Linzi's jaw drop. 'Ester, we're Orc
can't just –'

'She's not wrong, though,' Franklin says.

'I don't believe this,' Linzi says. 'We have to turn back!'

'The base,' Gem says. 'Hewett mentioned it has our most advanced
They might have medical supplies. Stuff that's *better* than state of the

Nelinha clicks her tongue. 'That's a huge long shot.'

'What base?' Franklin demands, hope kindling in his eyes. 'How fa

Everyone looks at me for guidance. I wonder if Gem has shared the
that I am now an Important Person. I don't have any guidance to offer.
even have shoes on.

But there's a map in the captain's cabin that might help.

'Do your best to keep Hewett stable,' I tell Franklin and Linzi. 'Gen
Ester, Nelinha – come with me. Let's see if we can find some answers.

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Since when do my classmates follow my orders?

Without further protest, Franklin and Linzi go back to monitoring th patient. Ester and Nelinha fall in behind me like an honour guard. Eve seems content to join the parade as we head down the corridor to the captain's cabin.

I still can't call it *my* cabin. That feels wrong and scary …

I make Gem wait outside while I change into proper clothes.

Socrates has returned to his tank. He chatters at me as if to say, *Hey, human, where's my squid?* I make a mental note to find him one soon.

Top stands on his hind legs and sniffs the dolphin. He doesn't seem terribly concerned about our new room-mate, though I get the feeling h prefer to sniff Socrates's tail for a formal introduction. I'm glad he can that.

Once I'm dressed, we bring in Gem. We gather around the conferen table.

Ester twists her fingers like she's playing incy wincy spider. 'I just v point out that I am not a prefect, and neither is Nelinha. We don't have seniority. Tia and Franklin should be here instead.'

'It's fine, babe,' Nelinha says. 'I told Tia I'd keep her in the loop. A saw Franklin. He's kinda busy.'

Ester doesn't look reassured. 'Okay … I guess that's okay.'

Gem eyes the robot-eyeball paperweight as if it might attack us. 'Do know how to work that thing?'

‘Hey,’ Nelinha chides him. ‘Don’t question my friend’s abilities.’ Sl
squints at me. ‘*Do* you know how?’

‘Only one way to find out.’ I grip the paperweight.

The metal is warm, like a phone that’s been recharging. I press my t
against the impression at the top. A mild electric tingle goes up to my
but I resist the urge to pull away.

The map ripples. The paperweight rises, hovering just over the grey
surface, and begins to move around. I’m reminded of the time we tried
Ouija board in our dorm room. Nelinha screamed as soon as the pointe
started drifting. I got an attack of the giggles. Ester launched into a lon
lecture about ideomotor effects and involuntary muscle impulses. We
did find out what the Ouija board predicted for our futures.

This time, nobody screams or giggles. The paperweight shifts to a p
the California coast. Our current position? How the robot-eye thing ca
this, I’m not sure.

A glowing line extends from the base of the paperweight like a sunb
stretching across the surface of the map, past latitude and longitude lin
numbers for sounding depths, and gentle curves indicating the ocean c
patterns and underwater topography. The line stops at a point in the mi
the Pacific Ocean where nothing is marked, just open water.

The thumbprint reader starts to hurt. The electric charge is building.

‘Ester,’ I say with a clenched jaw, ‘can you memorize those coordin

‘I ALREADY HAVE,’ she says. She’s excited. I get that.

I release the paperweight. The glowing line winks out of existence.

Nelinha whistles. ‘Okay, what we just saw? I can only *guess* how it
work. DNA activation releases some kind of encoded electric signal in
paper – or not-paper, whatever that material is. It shows you the encry
route. Leaves absolutely no trace afterwards. Like, wow.’

‘Electric eels communicate with low-energy pulses,’ Ester says. ‘Th
parchment could be eel skin, or probably a lab-grown organic material
derived from eel skin, because killing eels would be cruel. Nemo woul
that, would he?’ She looks at me for confirmation, then decides for he
‘No. That’s impossible.’

‘Whatever the case …’ Nelinha shakes her head in amazement. ‘My

‘Please don’t blaspheme,’ Gem says.

‘Who are you, my mother?’

‘I’m just asking politely …’

‘Both of you, knock it off,’ I say.

Surprisingly, they do.

‘Ester,’ I say, ‘how far are those coordinates from our current positi

I’m pretty sure I know the answer. Dolphins excel at navigation. I c nautical maps just fine. But Ester’s command of hard maths is better t mine. She can juggle more variables.

‘Maintaining top cruising speed,’ she says, ‘in a straight line? Seve hours. That’s assuming favourable weather, no mechanical problems a more attacks by LI’s varsity commandos. Also, there’s nothing marke chart at that location. Nothing even close. If we don’t find a base, we’l the middle of nowhere with no supplies. We’ll die.’

Well … no sugar-coating.

But three days is not as bad as I feared. We’re provisioned for a wee If we ration carefully, we might make it with the supplies we have on

My suspicious mind wonders if Hewett planned it this way. He *said* h know the location of the base. Nevertheless, we have exactly three da supplies for a three-day trip. That’s quite a coincidence.

On the other hand, I don’t think Hewett is faking his coma. I doubt would knowingly risk his life to lure us to a secret base and betray its to LI.

Also … I hate to admit it, but I love treasure hunts. Secret maps. *X* the spot. Nobody at Harding-Pencroft *doesn’t* love that stuff, and all I wanted to do with my life is explore the world, solving its puzzles. W this is a trap or not, it’s hard to resist.

A lot of things could go wrong. We’re only twelve hours out from S Alejandro. The responsible thing would be to turn around, but who on mainland could help us?

Our class has trained, suffered and worked for two years. The goal h been to graduate from Harding-Pencroft as the best marine scientists, warriors, navigators and underwater explorers in the world.

We owe it to our lost schoolmates to find out what’s at the other en that glowing line. I want to know why my parents sacrificed their live why Dev is … gone, too. But I can’t make this call on my own, no ma what Hewett said about following my orders.

‘Assemble the crew,’ I tell my friends. ‘We’ll make this decision to

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

I've never liked oral reports.

Put me in a group project, and I will volunteer to do the research. I v draw the maps. I will write the essay and create the multimedia slides. prefer to leave the presenting to somebody else.

This time, though, it has to be me who delivers the news.

Everyone assembles on the main deck. They line up by house, the w did yesterday at the docks in San Alejandro. I don't tell them to do this just our custom. The only people absent are Linzi, who is attending to Hewett in the sickbay, and my fellow Dolphin Virgil Esparza, who has bridge. I've already filled them in personally.

It's mid-morning. The ocean is ash grey with light swells. Clouds ha and heavy, promising rain. Not the most auspicious weather for makin major decision.

Gemini Twain stands on my right. I guess I appreciate the backup, b still not used to having a heavily armed Shark breathing down my neck expect him to push me out of the way and say, *So, now that I'm in cha*

The worst part is, I'm not sure I would object. I didn't ask for leader don't like everyone staring at me, waiting for answers.

'Here's the situation,' I begin.

I know there may be spies among us. Somebody betrayed our schoo and sabotaged our security from the inside. That somebody may be on deck. But I can't let that paralyse me. My classmates and I have been t a lot together over the last two years, and the last twenty-four hours. I' trusting them until one of them gives me a solid reason not to.

Besides, we're observing radio silence now. Hewett confiscated all
phones after Tia checked them for tracking chips, and even if the phon
weren't locked in a box in the captain's quarters there's no way anyon
get a signal this far out at sea. We've activated sonar and radar blockin
dynamic camouflage. We've swept the ship for secret transmitters. No
board should be able to share our location or our plans with the outside
world. At least in theory …

I tell the crew everything. Surprise, I'm descended from Captain Ne
No, not the cartoon fish. Our zappy guns and other gold-level toys are
on Nemo's tech. Land Institute and Harding-Pencroft have been fightin
cold war over said tech for 150 years. Now that cold war has been turn
to a full boil. The mother lode of alt-tech, including the wreck of Nemo
is supposedly at a secret HP base three days from our current position.
sub, the *Aronnax*, finds us in the meantime, we're fish food. Oh, and, b
way, Dr Hewett is in a coma in the sickbay and needs immediate treatm

'The way I see it,' I say, 'we have two options. We find this base, w
people there and maybe get help against LI. That's what Hewett wante
we turn back to California, report everything to the authorities and hop
can handle it. Questions?'

The group shifts uncomfortably. Everybody looks at everybody else
wondering who's going to speak first.

Kiya Jensen raises her hand. 'So, you're in charge now, Ana?' She g
at Gem. 'And we're okay with that?'

I try not to take this personally. Sharks are trained for command.
According to school tradition, Gem should be calling the shots, not me

I wonder if he will call for a vote on the matter. I imagine he'd win,
honestly I would be kind of relieved. Gemini Twain is competent and
reliable. He's annoying that way.

He gives Kiya a curt nod. 'The professor's orders were clear: find th
base, no matter what. Ana's got good intuition, and her Nemo genes le
operate things we can't touch. I agree with Dr Hewett. She's our best s

I face our classmates with what I hope is a calm *I totally knew Gem
support me* expression.

Rhys Morrow holds up an index finger. 'You're assuming the base e
exists. If Hewett was lying, we'll find ourselves in the middle of the Pa
with no supplies. He worked at LI, right? He could be our spy, sending
our deaths.'

Always a sunbeam of optimism, that girl. But she raises valid points

There's some uneasy murmuring in the group. Nobody looks shocke Rhys's allegations. Rumours travel quickly.

'The base is there,' Ester says.

She's kneeling next to Top, picking bits of crusted sea salt off his fu ears. Ester doesn't speak loudly, but she gets everyone's attention.

'You *know* this?' Franklin asks her.

'Not for sure.' She's still addressing Top. 'Not because I'm a Hardi anything. If Dr Hewett wanted us dead, there are easier ways than send to a make-believe island in the middle of the ocean. If Dr Hewett is a s more likely he was using us to find this base. He would need Ana for t Then he could sell us out to LI. *Then* they could kill us.'

That cheerful idea hangs in the warm, wet air. The sea churns under feet. Again, everyone is looking at me for answers.

I want to kick an LI upperclassman. I'm a week shy of fifteen years Why do *I* have to be handling this crisis? I want to scream, *This isn't f* But I've been screaming that internally ever since my parents died, and done me no good. I've learned that the world doesn't care what is right me. I have to *make* it care.

'Searching for the base is a risk,' I admit. I'm amazed my voice doe break. 'Our other option is to turn back. That's a risk, too. The *Aronna* somewhere in these waters, and we saw what it did to the school. We h lot of … a lot of friends on campus.'

More than friends. I think of Dev's crooked grin. His early birthday me, my mother's black pearl, hangs heavily around my neck. I look at Ramsay, whose sister was a sophomore. Kay's watery red eyes are gla hole in the deck boards. Brigid Salter, who had a brother in the junior c trembles as she leans against her housemate Rhys for support.

Yesterday was about shock, uncertainty, fear. Our world was shatter Today, we have to figure out how to reassemble ourselves from the bro pieces.

Some of us were *literally* shattered. Eloise McManus's left shoulder wrapped in gauze, her arm in a sling so she can't hold a rifle. For a Sha that must be infuriating. Meadow Newman stands stiff and pale. Her sl hides her bandages, but I remember the silver barb that hit her in the shoulder.

Her fellow Cephalopod Robbie Barr leans on a crutch, his right leg i
cast from his encounter with a Leyden harpoon. He wipes his nose wit
cloth handkerchief. He's not crying, he's just famous for his many alle
Even on the open sea, he can find something that makes him sneeze.

'This alt-tech …' Robbie squints sideways at me. 'You're saying it
HP's mission all along to safeguard this stuff. And none of us were tol
even you?'

'Not even me,' I confirm. 'Until yesterday, I knew nothing.'

I try not to let my eyes drift to Ester. I'm pretty sure she knew more
she was allowed to say, but I don't want to put her on the spot in front
everybody.

Cooper Dunne hefts his new Leyden pistol. 'And there are more sur
like this at the secret base?'

Cooper's leg is still bandaged from the harpoon wound yesterday, b
doesn't seem bothered by it. If anything, he sounds anxious for a rema
with LI – preferably with bigger guns on our side next time.

'Hewett said that Leyden weapons were the simple stuff,' I recall. 'I
claimed Nemo's most complicated tech is still *way* beyond our best sci
Our trials this weekend were supposed to be our first introduction.'

More grumbling in the ranks. Ah, yes, the good old days of twenty-f
hours ago, when our biggest worry was passing the trials and staying a

Tia Romero tugs at her corkscrew hair. 'So the upperclassmen, even
sophomores … they knew all about this stuff, and they never breathed
word.'

I can tell nobody likes the idea that the sophomores had important ir
information. The tenth-graders were the worst.

On the other hand, the secret of alt-tech does explain why they alwa
looked at us so smugly. A lot of things make sense now. The tight secu
around Verne Hall. The armed guards. The gold-level crates.

I still can't believe Dev kept all these secrets from me … about our
heritage, and especially about the circumstances of our parents' death.
more I think about it, though, the less angry I am. It just makes me sad
Dev had to carry that weight alone. I wish I could have helped him. No
gone …

'We can't let them have it.' Brigid Salter's voice draws me out of m
thoughts. She still looks shaky, like she's emerged from a three-day bo
the flu, but her expression is hard as iron. 'This base. It might be all we

left of HP. We can't let Land Institute take it. Or you, Ana … We can' them have you, either.'

I get a lump in my throat. It would be so easy for Brigid, for *all* my classmates, to blame me for what has happened, given the fact that *I'm* one Land Institute is after. Instead, I can sense the anger rippling throu group, and that anger isn't directed at me.

'I call for a vote,' Gem announces. 'I say we give Ana command. W follow her orders, work together and find this base. Then we make Lar Institute pay for what they've done. All in favour?'

The vote is unanimous. Everybody raises a hand except Top, and I l think I have his moral support.

I swallow the metallic taste of fear. I've just been made acting capta ship with a crew of twenty freshmen, a dog, a dolphin and one comato adult.

I do not want that responsibility. Just because I'm descended from N does not mean I'm captain material. But my classmates need someone behind, someone who will bring them better fortunes. God help them, decided that someone is me. For them, for our lost friends and especial Dev, I have to try.

'I won't let you down.'

As soon as those words are out of my mouth, I think, *How can I pro that?*

'Prefects, to the bridge with me,' I say, my legs shaking. 'Everyone your assigned stations. We've got work to do!'

It's only seventy-two more hours, I tell myself.

Then we'll either find help at this secret base … or we'll most likely

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I swallow the metallic taste of fear. I've just been made acting captain of a ship with a crew of twenty freshmen, a dog, a dolphin and one comatose adult.

I do not want that responsibility. Just because I'm descended from Nemo does not mean I'm captain material. But my classmates need someone to rally behind, someone who will bring them better fortunes. God help them, they've decided that someone is me. For them, for our lost friends and especially for Dev, I have to try.

'I won't let you down.'

As soon as those words are out of my mouth, I think, *How can I promise that?*

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It's only seventy-two more hours, I tell myself.

Then we'll either find help at this secret base … or we'll most likely die.



CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Turns out running a ship is hard work.

I guess I should've known this. I've been on the *Varuna* enough tim before. But I've never been in charge of an entire crew, especially not trying to figure out crates full of Nemo-based alt-tech.

My meeting with the prefects goes well enough. We organize our assignment schedule and daily shifts. One Dolphin and one Shark will the bridge at all times as quartermaster and officer of the deck. Orcas a Cephalopods will conduct a careful unpacking and analysis of our gold tech. Linzi and Franklin will alternate in the sickbay looking after Dr H Everyone will take turns preparing meals, keeping an inventory of sup monitoring the critical systems and cleaning the *Varuna*. (Ships get dir quickly with twenty-one people and a dog on board.) Meanwhile, Top follow Ester around and look cute. Socrates will come and go as he ple eating fish and playing in the ocean. Why do the animals get the best j

Once all that's decided, I set our course. I figure we'll have to risk travelling in a straight line to the island. We don't have enough time or supplies to be tricky and zigzag around the ocean, hoping to throw off pursuers. Hewett's advanced camouflage and anti-sonar tech had bette

I leave Virgil Esparza and Dru Cardenas in command for the first w Tia Romero stays on the bridge, too. She's been working on Dr Hewet control pad, trying to get access and route the encrypted data to the onl computer. I wish her luck, though I'm not sure I can handle any more r blowing secrets that Dr Hewett might have been waiting to spring on u

I spend the first part of the day making the rounds. I check on the cr give them encouragement. I try not to trip over the many open gold-lev boxes now scattered around the ship. I get a lot of questions from excit Cephalopods and Orcas: what is this? How does it work? Most of the t don't have a clue what I'm looking at. I might have Nemo's DNA, but not come with any latent knowledge or a handy user's manual.

By noon, rain is hammering down. Swells have risen to five feet. It' nothing we haven't handled before, but it's not great for morale. If you stuck working belowdecks and can't get fresh air or see the horizon, ev those with the strongest stomachs can get seasick.

I find Nelinha in the engine room. She's sitting on the corrugated ste floor, her legs in a V with a gold-level crate open in front of her. Toda has refreshed her Rosie the Riveter look with a red top and red polka-d bandanna. She seems completely engrossed in sorting through wires ar metal plates. I have a flashback to Dev in sixth grade, building Lego rc

I turn to Gem, who's been following me around all morning. 'Why d you get some lunch? I'll be fine.'

He looks torn between his duty as bodyguard and his discomfort at b around Nelinha. Finally, he nods and lopes off. This is a relief. He's be standing behind me so long, I'm starting to think his breath is leaving a impression on my shoulder.

'How's *that* going?' Nelinha waves her screwdriver at the spot wher was standing.

I'm tempted to say that Gem isn't so bad, but that's not for me to tel Nelinha, given their history. I just shrug.

'Hmph.' Nelinha turns her attention back to the half-disassembled d in her hand.

I think back to that infamous day in September of our chum year. W brand new, trying to survive the meat grinder of orientation month. Tw our classmates had already dropped out and gone home in tears.

Nelinha was struggling more than most. Her English was excellent, was still her second language. She was relieved to sit next to me in the cafeteria because I knew some Portuguese. Then, one night at dinner, (shadow fell across our table. He stood over us, gawking at Nelinha like was a unicorn.

'Are you the scholarship kid?' he asked. 'From Brazil?'

There was no malice in his voice, but his words carried. We'd just fi
a hard day of physical training. Nobody had much energy left for chatt
Our classmates turned to see who Gem was talking about.

The scholarship kid.

Nelinha's face hardened. My fingers curled around the handle of my
was tempted to stab Gemini Twain in the thigh. He'd just reduced my
friend's identity to three words that would cling to her for the rest of th

Gem seemed oblivious. He started rambling about his brother who v
LDS missionary in Rocinha. Did Nelinha know him? Had she met any
missionaries? How was life in the favela?

Eventually I would realize that being a straight shooter was just an
extension of Gem's personality. When he saw a target, he aimed and sh
did not think about collateral damage.

Nelinha put down her utensils. She gave Gem a sour smile. 'I don't
your brother. Ana, you finished?'

She stormed off. I gave Gem a withering look, then abandoned my c
and rushed to follow her out of the cafeteria.

Later in the eighth-grade barracks, after lights out, I heard Nelinha s
in her bunk. At first, I assumed it was Ester. But Ester was fast asleep a
snoring. Nelinha was curled up and miserable, shivering under her blar
crawled in next to her and held her while she wept, until finally she fel
asleep.

Nelinha had gone through a lot in her thirteen years. She grew up an
orphan – no family, no opportunities, no money. Then, thanks to an
elementary-school teacher who saw something special in her, Nelinha
recommended for the HP entry tests in Rio. She blew the tops off all th
mechanical-aptitude scores. She deserved to be known as more than *th*
scholarship kid.

Since that day in the cafeteria, I've stayed angry at Gemini Twain fo
almost two years. I guess that wasn't fair or justified. But I don't like a
making my friends hurt.

Now, HP has been destroyed. Nelinha's future is once again a giant
question mark. Like me, she doesn't have any family or home to return
All we have is this boat ride to the middle of nowhere …

'This is crazy.' Her voice breaks me out of my trance. I wonder how
I've been standing there watching her work.

'What's crazy?'

She holds up her gadget, which looks like a bespoke metal tennis ba had a head-on collision with a Slinky. ‘If I’m right, this is a LOCUS.’

I try to place the name. The memory of Dr Hewett’s dry voice come to me from some long-ago theoretical marine sciences lecture. ‘An electrolocation sensor?’

‘Correct!’ Nelinha wriggles her immaculately groomed eyebrows. ‘Imagine a more effective, undetectable alternative to radar and sonar, on aquatic mammals’ senses. Whales. Dolphins. Platypuses. If I can fi out, it could allow us to check for incoming hostiles without giving aw position.’

‘Or it could make us light up on sonar screens,’ I speculate.

‘Maybe,’ Nelinha agrees cheerfully. ‘Where’s your sense of adventu

I shake my head in amazement. ‘How can you take all this so calmly like that shouldn’t be scientifically possible.’

She tosses the LOCUS into the air and catches it again. ‘Babe, our understanding of the laws of science changes all the time. We’ve only many senses. We have such a narrow perspective on reality –’

‘Uh-oh.’ I realize I’ve blundered right into a #NelinhaLecture.

‘That’s right, *uh-oh*. This LOCUS … it’s like something dolphins m engineer if they wanted to augment their natural senses. Or squid, if th a few more millennia of evolution. Your ancestor was a genius. It’s lik everybody was looking at the world in three dimensions, and somehow was able to step back and see it in *five*. Everything is the same, but eve is different. If we could replicate –’

I’m saved from the rest of the lecture when Ester stumbles in breath Top at her heels.

‘COME WITH ME – YOU NEED TO SEE THIS.’ Her eyes are red crying. ‘YOU DON’T WANT TO, BUT YOU NEED TO.’

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CHAPTER NINETEEN

What I hate the most?

None of us will ever be able to get these images out of our heads. Th recorded at HP by Dr Hewett's drones is playing on six monitors on th bridge. We will be reliving this trauma in full colour for the rest of our

Tia stands back from the console, her hands tented over her mouth. and Dru seem paralysed at their stations. When we walk in, Nelinha gr like she's been punched in the chest.

The drones show us our former campus from six different angles. Th churns white and brown, frothy with debris. The cliff has been sheared in a near-perfect crescent, like some god took an ice-cream scooper an helped himself to a giant serving of California. Nothing remains of Ha Pencroft except the buckled asphalt of the main driveway leading to th abandoned gatehouse. None of the videos show any people. I can't dec that's a blessing or a curse.

What happened to the guards at the gate? Is it possible some of the students got out before the buildings collapsed?

My gut tells me no. There wasn't time. There probably wasn't any warning, either. Everyone at HP is now at the bottom of the bay. Given I've learned about marine decomposition, it may be a long time before evidence comes to the surface.

Evidence. Oh, god. How can I think of my schoolmates as *evidence*?

I remember Dev smiling at me. *You're leaving for your freshman tri today. I wanted you to have the pearl for luck – just in case, you know, fail spectacularly or something.*

My mother's black pearl feels like an anchor around my neck.

‘There’s – there’s this, too.’ Tia hits a button on the keyboard. All si screens switch to the same image: a dark triangular shape, floating underwater just inside the entrance of the bay. It’s hard to judge the ob depth or relative size, but it looks massive, like a sunken stealth bombe we watch, it ripples and vanishes.

‘The *Aronnax*,’ I say.

‘It has dynamic camouflage,’ Nelinha notes.

Pressure builds in my throat. I need to howl. I need to throw things a monitors. *This is so wrong. And it’s way too much for me to handle.* Somehow, I manage to push down my rage.

‘Anything else?’ I ask Tia.

‘Um …’ Her fingers tremble over the keyboard. ‘Yeah. Dr Hewett v recording satellite newsfeeds for a couple of hours after the attack. We international headlines.’

The monitors switch to television reports from around the Pacific Ri California, Oregon, Japan, China, Russia, Guam, the Philippines. On S local news, a grim-faced reporter talks over the tagline MASSIVE LANDSI CLAIMS SECONDARY SCHOOL IN CA: OVER 100 FEARED DEAD. On China’s st network, the news ticker reads in Mandarin CRUMBLING AMERICAN INFRASTRUCTURE CAUSES ANOTHER TRAGEDY. The anchor quotes ‘unnam sources’ who believe faulty foundation work and lax building regulatic may have led to the tragedy. None of the stories call the incident an att

‘How can they not *see* it?’ Virgil demands. ‘A landslide doesn’t leav perfect semicircle!’

But the images on the news are different from the feeds recorded by Hewett’s drones. By the time the media helicopters got to the scene, apparently hours after the attack, the edges of the landslide had crumbl turned ragged, making it look more like a natural disaster.

Some of the news programmes cut to faces of weeping parents.

‘Turn it off,’ I say. ‘Please.’

The monitors go dark.

The bridge is silent for the space of two swells. The *Varuna* surges a plunges as we forge through the storm, leaving my heart at the crest of wave. Looking out of the bridge’s windows, I can see the crew stagger around in rain gear, lines on, making sure our water collectors are oper harvest the downpour.

I look at Tia. ‘The others don’t need to see this footage right now. Everyone is already upset enough. I’m not saying we hide the informat but seeing those images …’

Tia nods. ‘It’s just … None of the reports mention our field trip. Tha means everybody probably assumes we’re dead. Our parents. Friends. Relatives.’

I know she’s thinking of her own family back in Michigan. She goes Tia because she has three baby nephews and two nieces she adores. He and dad, her aunts and uncles, her brothers and sisters … they all will l going out of their minds.

‘I get it,’ I say, though that’s kind of a lie. I have no one back home waiting for me, worrying about me. ‘The thing is, Land Institute know alive. The *Aronnax* is hunting us. If we break radio silence –’

‘We might *be* dead,’ Dru says.

A typical point-and-shoot Shark comment, but he’s right.

Virgil rubs his chin. ‘Bernie, our bus driver – he knows we’re alive, And those guards from the docks in San Alejandro. They’ll tell everyb weren’t on campus when it collapsed, won’t they?’

‘If they’re still alive,’ Dru offers.

I remember Hewett’s orders to the guards. *Buy us time.*

‘For now,’ I say, ‘we keep going. We just have to hope …’

I’m not sure how to finish that thought. There are too many things w to hope for. Right now, our supply of hope feels as limited as our food water.

Top bumps against Ester’s leg. He makes a little whimper, looking u her with his mournful *Pet me* eyes. That’s when I realize Ester has bee silently crying. Top is really earning his dog biscuits.

‘Hey,’ I tell Ester. ‘We’ll get through this –’

She makes a noise somewhere between a sniffle and a hiccup. Then rushes out of the bridge, Top right behind her.

‘I’ll go after her,’ Nelinha offers.

‘No, I’ll do it,’ I say. ‘Nelinha, show Tia your LOCUS thingy. If it w want it installed right away.’

‘LOCUS thingy?’ Tia asks.

Nelinha holds up her metal tennis ball/Slinky catastrophe.

‘Cool,’ Tia says. As I’m turning to leave, she calls, ‘Ana, I want to t more thing with Hewett’s control pad. When his drones flew over the

campus, they would've tried to sync with the school's intranet.'

I suppress a shiver. 'But the school had already been destroyed.'

Tia hesitates. 'The computer systems were designed to withstand a l
Like the black boxes on aeroplanes. It's possible the drones retrieved s
data before the intranet died completely.'

I don't feel confident about this plan. More data will mean more pai
more reminders of what we've lost, but I manage a nod. 'Sounds fine.
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I don't feel confident about this plan. More data will mean more pain, more reminders of what we've lost, but I manage a nod. 'Sounds fine. Keep up the good work.'

Then I jog after Ester and Top.



CHAPTER TWENTY

I find Ester in the ship's library.

On past trips, it's been one of our favourite spots. The walls are line floor-to-ceiling with books: everything from physics manuals to recent bestsellers. Wooden crossbars secure the shelves to keep volumes from around when the ship moves. The mahogany study table has armchairs six. Against the back wall is a comfy old corduroy sofa that we always over when we have free time. When we *had* free time. There won't be of that for the foreseeable future. Ester is curled up at one end, clutchir leather-bound book in her lap. Top lies next to her, wagging his tail.

'Hey …' I sit cross-legged on the rug at Ester's feet. This gets me a wet kiss from Top.

'It's my fault.' Ester sniffles. 'I needed to … They have to let me rel They will, won't they? I didn't bring extra index cards. I'm so stupid. I my fault.'

I don't follow everything she's saying. Sometimes when Ester talks, just have to go along for the ride and enjoy the scenery. But one thing understand.

'None of this is your fault, Ester.'

'It is. I'm a Harding.'

I would give her a hug right now, but she isn't like Nelinha. Unexpe physical contact with anyone other than Top, especially when she's fee upset, makes her uncomfortable. Exceptions are hugs she asks for and occasional tackle in combat training.

‘Just because your family started the school …’ I falter. I realize for
first time that our fourth great-grandfathers knew each other. Their me
set in motion everything now affecting our lives. It’s enough to give m
vertigo. ‘You couldn’t have known what would happen.’

As usual, her frizzy hair makes her look like she recently stuck her f
in a light socket. Her pink blouse accentuates her strawberries-and-mil
complexion. Nelinha has advised her many times to wear another colo
dark blue or green – but Ester likes pink. The fact that Ester is stubbor
that makes me appreciate her even more.

‘I *did* know,’ she says miserably. ‘And I know what’s going to happ
you.’

One moment, I feel like I’m holding up my friend. The next, I feel li
she’s dangling me off a cliff.

My mind races. I’m dying to yell *WHAT DO YOU MEAN?* and pull
information out of her. But I don’t want to make things worse.

‘Tell me about it?’ I suggest.

Ester wipes her nose. The gilded title of the book in her lap reads *Th*
Mysterious Island. Of course we would have a copy on board. I wonde
a first edition signed by Captain Nemo. Prince Dakkar. Fourth Great-
Grandpa. I don’t even know what to call him.

‘Harding and Pencroft,’ she starts. ‘Nemo asked them to safeguard h
legacy.’

I nod. I’d learned as much from Hewett. I just have to wait and see w
Ester takes me on this ride.

‘Since Nemo couldn’t destroy the *Nautilus*,’ she continues, ‘he want
Harding and Pencroft to make sure no one discovered its final resting p
until the time was right.’

‘Why couldn’t he destroy his sub?’ I ask, though the very question s
wrong. It’s like asking why Botticelli didn’t burn *The Birth of Venus* b
he died.

Ester traces her finger over the gold lettering on the book’s cover. ‘I
know. The best Nemo could do was sink the *Nautilus* under that island
knew Aronnax and Land were searching for him. He was alone, dying.
guess he had no choice. He decided to trust Harding and Pencroft with
secrets and his treasure.’

Nemo, I think. *Harding and Pencroft.*

Ester and I were bound together centuries before we were born. It m
me wonder about reincarnation and karma, and whether our souls migl
met at another time.

'So how were they supposed to know?' I ask. 'I mean … how would
Harding and Pencroft know when the time was right to find the sub ag

Ester tucks in her knees. 'That grey map in the captain's cabin. The
reader. They would only work for Nemo's direct descendants. Only af
certain number of generations had passed. I don't know how Nemo de

We didn't … My ancestors didn't know exactly how long the wait wou
Your dad tried it when he was a student at HP. No luck. Then he tried
again, two years ago, just to see, I guess. For whatever reason, it worke
was the first.'

A clinch knot tightens in my throat.

I remember the electric sensation travelling up my arm when I had g
that weird robotic paperweight. My father had done the same thing bef
me. I can almost feel his warm, callused hand slipping into mine.

'I knew about alt-tech.' Ester shivers, which makes Top cuddle clos
'The board of trustees – they briefed me last fall. Not all the details, bu
your family. And *my* family. I wanted to tell you. Keeping those secret
wrong … and *dangerous.* But the trustees control my inheritance, and
school. They made me sign a bunch of papers. If I said anything to any
even you … I'm so sorry, Ana. Maybe if I'd talked to you earlier, we c
have saved HP.'

I want to reassure her, but my voice won't work. Too many facts are
swirling around in my head.

'I'm the last of the Hardings,' she says. 'The Pencrofts died off a
generation ago. The trustees don't like me. After my aunt died when I
… She was the last of the really *great* Hardings. I'm just … just me.'

The sadness in her voice makes my heart ache. 'Oh, Ester –'

'When I turn eighteen,' she forges on, 'they're supposed to give me
control. But … you know, they might never. They doubt I'm capable.
the school is gone. I need to rebuild HP. I don't know how. I'm sorry i
hate me now, Ana. I don't want you to hate me.'

I think about poor Ester living at HP since she was six years old. I k
about her aunt's death. I knew she had no living family, just legal guar
but I'd never appreciated how much pressure and responsibility went a
with the Harding name. All her life, instead of being loved and nurture

Ester had been watched over by a council of lawyers who loved and nu her money while monitoring her for signs of incompetence. At least I'd known my parents. I'd had them in my life.

'Ester, I don't hate you,' I promise. 'Of course I don't. You weren't allowed to say anything.'

Her lip quivers. 'The others will hate me, though.'

'No. And if anybody does I will put pink-ducky water wings on ther throw them overboard.'

She sniffles some more. 'That was a joke, right?'

'No. But no one will hate you.'

'What about the trustees? I told you what I know. They'll disinherit

'If the trustees give you any problems, I will personally kick each ar every one of them in the groin.'

Ester considers this. She doesn't ask if I'm joking. 'Okay. That's go love you.'

She says it with such a flat tone that anyone else could have missed taken it as a polite, meaningless phrase, like *How you doing?* But I knc means it.

'I love you, too,' I say. 'Can I ask you one more thing?'

She nods. As she strokes Top's ear, I notice how badly she's chewe her cuticles.

I'm not sure I want to know the answer, but I ask anyway. 'You saic knew what was going to happen to me. What did you mean?'

She frowns at the picture on the front of the book. A dark, jagged vc rises from the churning sea. In the foreground, a drenched dog that loo much like Top trembles alone on a tiny outcropping of rock.

'When your parents found the *Nautilus*,' she says, 'they tried to ope They tried to go inside. Your dad should have been able to do it. He w direct descendant of Nemo. I don't know exactly what happened, but something went wrong. That's why HP was so careful with Dev. They want him to go near the sub until they understood –'

'Wait,' I say, my head spinning. 'My parents' death was an accident

'I don't think so.' For a rare moment, Ester actually meets my eyes. *Nautilus* is dangerous, Ana. I think it killed your parents. I don't want kill you, too.'

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CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Over the next two days, I try not to obsess too much about Ester's wor

I don't succeed. At night, I lie awake thinking about my parents' dea imagine them diving into the creepy rusted-out wreck of a sub, only to trapped inside, or killed by some ancient booby trap. I think about Dev how it must have torn him up to keep so many secrets. I have nightmar about the dark arrowhead shape of the *Aronnax* hurtling towards us underwater, cracking the *Varuna*'s hull in two.

During the day, I'm too busy stressing about immediate problems to about problems that might kill me later. Thank goodness for small favo

Among the low points: we're running short of food. We've needed a more than I thought we would, and we weren't as good about rationing hoped. This makes me feel guilty that I sneaked an extra chocolate-chi cookie after dinner the first night. (What I really wanted was a fresh-ba gujiya dipped in hot chai, but desperate times call for desperate comfor foods.)

Also, I had to break up a fistfight between Cooper and Virgil. They into it after one of them made a comment about – actually, I didn't eve I pushed them apart and did some yelling. This felt better than it proba should have. I was tempted to confine them to their quarters, but I neec everybody working. Their fight made one thing clear: nerves are startin fray.

Also, Dr Hewett's condition continues to deteriorate. Franklin and I have worked themselves to exhaustion keeping him alive, but they can for sure whether he'll make it another day. His blood pressure is low. I

heartbeat is weak. His urine … I may have blanked out when they told about his urine.

The trip's high points are notably fewer.

For one, Nelinha has got the LOCUS working. Gem, Ester, Tia and her on the bridge for the big reveal. We're not sure what to expect. The tennis-ball thingy has been mounted on top of the navigation console. Slinky-esque coils run in all directions like the tentacles of an octopus, attached to various points of the console with seemingly no rhyme or r Do they work like antennae? Grounding wires?

'Here we go.' Nelinha turns a copper dial on the side of the orb.

The room fills with floating green patches of light, like we're inside aquarium that desperately needs cleaning.

Ester says, 'This seems wrong.'

'Hold on,' Nelinha says. 'Let me recalibrate the display resolution .

She twists another knob. The green lights shrink into a glowing sphe size of a basketball, hovering over the base of the LOCUS.

I realize immediately what we're seeing. Our boat is the tiny white c hovering in the centre. The sphere's upper half is a swirl of faint green wind patterns, rain and clouds in real time. The lower hemisphere shov conditions underwater in a darker emerald light: currents, depth readin a whole host of dots and blobs of various sizes moving beneath us.

'Marine life,' I guess. 'That's got to be a school of fish. What's that, whale?'

Nelinha beams. 'We are electrolocating, gang.'

I'm enthralled by the three-dimensional readout. It should be too mu information, too complicated to read, but I understand it instinctively. *feel* the ship's position, how it relates to the currents and the winds, ho affects the movements of the creatures around us.

'This is so much better than sonar or ECDIS,' I murmur. 'How is thi possible?'

Nelinha looks pleased, like she's just baked a batch of cookies every loves. 'I told you, babe – a different perspective on the laws of science we're seeing is a visual representation of the way marine mammals sen their environment. And, yeah, it's *way* better than puny land-animal te

'Nice work, da Silva.' Tia Romero squints at the controls around the of the LOCUS. 'You're sure this isn't making us light up on the radar s of every ship within a thousand miles?'

‘Pretty sure. Like ninety percent. Eighty-five percent.’

‘What if the *Aronnax* has similar tech?’ I ask. ‘Will dynamic camou fool a LOCUS?’

Nelinha’s smile turns to a grimace. ‘Maybe?’

It’s an unsettling thought. There are no signs of other vessels on the LOCUS readout – submarine or otherwise. But is it possible the *Aronn* out there, as invisible to us as we’re (hopefully) invisible to them?

‘If they *do* show themselves,’ Gem says, ‘we’ll test our other new tc

He points out of the window. On the forward deck, the Sharks have assembled their favourite discovery from the gold-level boxes: a Leyd cannon the size of a jet ski. Its coppery barrel is laced with wires and i gear work. Its mounted pedestal swivels 270 degrees. I don’t know wh might do to an enemy ship, especially one like the *Aronnax*, but Gem a housemates are raring for target practice. I have already warned them t *not* allowed to electrocute whales or fishing boats.

The other high point of our trip: the *Varuna*’s engines freeze up.

I know that sounds like a bad thing. Getting stranded in the middle c ocean and starving to death would typically fall into that category. Hov the Cephalopods are confident that they can make repairs. In the mean Halimah Nasser suggests that somebody use this opportunity to do a vi inspection of the hull’s exterior. I volunteer so fast I make her jump.

I get on my buoyancy-control vest and scuba tank. I grab my mask, and a dead squid (for obvious reasons). The water is warm enough that don’t need a wetsuit. I topple backwards into the sea. As soon as my cl bubbles dissipates, I spot Socrates swimming towards me, delighted to playmate.

He chatters and nudges me cheerfully. I give him the squid, but that doesn’t seem to satisfy him. As I start to inspect the hull, he gooses me my attention.

‘Rude!’ I mumble through my breather.

This makes no impression on him. Dolphins are shameless goosers.

He nudges me again, and I realize he wants to show me something.

I follow him to the forward starboard side of the hull. Just below the line, there’s a fist-size grappling hook embedded in the wooden knock rail. A frayed cord trails from it into the gloom. I guess this is a souver by our uninvited guests from Land Institute. They must have fastened to the *Varuna* just before they surfaced.

The damage is probably superficial, but I don't want to take chances don't want *anything* from LI on my ship. I tug the hook free and let it s into the depths.

I thank Socrates with a pat on the head. Then I surface to request rep supplies.

By the time I've patched the damage and inspected the rest of the hu which looks fine – I still have thirty minutes of air in my tank.

Socrates and I go for a quick dive. Fifteen feet under, we dance toge hold his flippers and continue my year-long campaign to teach him the Hokey Pokey. Humming through my breather, I lead him through the r *You put your right flipper in, you put your right flipper out.* Socrates cl doesn't understand this strange human ritual, but judging from his laug face, he finds it (and me) very amusing.

At one point, a sunfish cruises by that's bigger than either of us. It's wonderfully weird-looking thing, like somebody fused a shark, a cauli and a chunk of iron pyrite and flattened it until it's almost two-dimensi Socrates ignores our visitor, since it's neither dangerous nor edible. I w and invite the sunfish to dance with us. It glides on by. I remember a h column by Dave Barry that my dad read to me when I was little, about fish only have two thoughts, *Food?* and *Yikes!* But there is a third fish thought, which this sunfish's expression relays perfectly: *Y'all humans weird.*

I wish I could stay underwater with Socrates forever, dancing in the swirls of bubbles with sunlight rippling through the green.

I guess I lose track of time.

I hear the sharp *clink, clink, clink* of a metal object being tapped aga hull. Someone is telling me to surface.

I give Socrates a high five for good work. Then I start my ascent.

Back on board, I feel much better. The sea always refreshes me. I se my tank and rinse my gear as we get underway. The repaired engines h smoothly. The weather has cleared, leaving us with smooth seas and a burgundy sunset. By the end of the day tomorrow, if we're lucky, we s arrive at HP's secret base. We might find help, safety, answers. And, w knows, maybe even a new supply of chocolate-chip cookies.

My good mood lasts until Gemini Twain pokes his head out of the b 'We need you.' His tone makes it clear there is more bad news.

s. I also sink pair ıll – ther. I moves. learly ghing a flower ional. vave umour how s *are* silver inst the cure ıum rich hould vho ridge.

I find Tia Romero hunched over the comm station, clutching headph to her ears. She frowns when she sees me.

‘We retrieved some audio from the school’s intranet,’ she says. ‘You better sit down.’

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CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

I think I'm prepared for anything.

I'm wrong.

When Dev's voice comes through the headphones, I choke back a sc

'*– major threat. Need everyone to EVACUATE. I –*'

The recording breaks into static.

I pull off the headphones and throw them down. I back away from tl
if they're a tarantula.

'I'm so sorry,' Tia says. 'There's nothing else. Just feedback.'

My legs shake. I'm wearing only my bikini. Salt water runs down m
dripping on the rubberized floor around my feet. I'm not sure if I'm sh
more from cold or from shock.

'Dev warned them,' I murmur. 'They might have got out. He might
alive?'

Lee-Ann Best is the navigator on duty. Her ears turn red, a 'tell' tha
about to lie. Lee-Ann knows this about herself. Given her interest in cc
espionage, you'd think she would grow her hair long to hide her lie-de
ears. Instead, she keeps her black locks shaved on the sides.

'Maybe,' she says. 'I mean, it's possible, right?'

Gem frowns. 'I don't think there was time. Ana, the noise at the end
recording …'

I know he's right.

That jumble of static was most likely the sound of our school collap
into the ocean. I imagine Dev was speaking over the school intercom.

probably down in the security room, under the administration building wouldn't have left until he was sure people were evacuating.

The drones captured no footage of anyone alive. None of the news r mentioned survivors. Dev is really gone.

All I have left is a garbled recording of his last desperate moments.

I try to say something. I realize that if I don't leave now, I will fall t pieces in front of everyone. I turn and exit the bridge.

I don't remember making it to my cabin.

I curl up in my bed. I stare at the water sloshing around in Socrates' empty tank.

I try to recapture the feeling of serenity I had in the sea, dancing wit dolphin friend. It's gone. Guilt has clamped its metal claws on my gut.

I should have been there for Dev. Maybe if I'd been more insistent a what I saw: that strange reset of the grid's lights … Maybe if I'd gone straight to the security team myself instead of taking time to eat breakf my brother might still be alive.

I never got to say goodbye to my parents. Not properly. They said th were going off on another expedition and they'd be back in a month or They told me to be good. I let them leave with nothing but a hug, a kis roll of my eyes. *Of course I'll be good. You guys should worry about I* My mom said, *We'll be back before you know it.* And I believed her. T always came back.

Now I've lost Dev, too. Why do I keep missing my chances to say goodbye?

The pain in my gut is getting worse. It takes me a moment to realize not just from grief. My period has started.

Great. Like I don't have enough going on.

I stagger to my feet and rummage through my bag for toiletries and clothes.

When I open the cabin door, Nelinha and Ester are both standing the They look sheepish, like they were just debating whether or not to kno They register my pained expression, the box of maxi-pads clutched in hand. They get out of my way, understanding that I need to reach the bathroom.

'I'll get the painkillers,' Ester says.

'I'll fill the hot-water bottle,' says Nelinha.

I mumble my thanks as I stumble past. They know the routine. Even the B1 supplements, constant exercise and a good diet, my monthly cra are torturous. I understand why periods were historically called a 'curs Two and a half years I've been dealing with this now. Without my frie don't know how I would have coped.

Once I'm dressed and back in the cabin, I curl up in my bunk again. down a couple of painkillers and press the hot-water bottle against my abdomen.

Yellow spots of pain dance before my eyes. What feels like metal gr arms continue to clamp my gut.

Top trots over and kisses me on the nose. He wants to help.

'YOU'RE NOT GOING TO DIE,' Ester tells me.

I laugh, which hurts. 'Thanks, Ester. I always get through this.'

'NOT YOUR PERIOD,' she says. 'I MEAN ON THE ISLAND.'

'Volume, babe,' Nelinha says.

'Sorry.' Ester sits at the table and begins flipping through index card 'I've been writing down all the secrets I can remember. All the stuff I supposed to tell you. It's here somewhere.'

'Ester has been busy,' Nelinha tells me. 'We're just going to be sure keep these cards safe from now on, right, Ester? We won't leave top-se notes lying around where anyone can find them?'

'I put them down in the kitchen for a minute,' Ester confesses. 'Whi snuck a cookie. It's fine. Nobody saw.'

Aha. So I'm not the only chocolate-chip-cookie thief. If the crew mu Ester and I will both have to walk the plank.

When I first realized Ester had such a great memory, I asked her wh needed the note cards. She explained it like this: she can remember an symphony orchestra, a hundred musicians playing at once. But if you a what the oboe was doing in the second bar of the third movement, she immediately unravel that information from all the other sounds she abs The cards help her make sense of the music. She can colour-code the b section, so to speak, and keep it separate from the strings and the percu She can unwrap the symphony and study it instrument by instrument, l line.

Without her index cards, the world is a scary, overwhelming place.

'Here.' She holds up a bright-blue card, covered front and back with neat handwriting. 'Tomorrow, when we get close to the secret base, th

going to be a challenge.'

I try to concentrate. The hot-water bottle is slowly doing its work, re the knots in my belly, but the pain is still blinding. Dev's voice crackle my head. *Major threat. Need everyone to EVACUATE.*

'A challenge?' I manage.

Ester nods. 'Standard protocol when someone approaches a base. It right here. I don't know what kind of challenge. Something to make su are legitimate. If we're not, the island will probably destroy us with alt weapons.'

'But that won't happen,' Nelinha says.

'No,' Ester agrees. 'Because …' She looks at Nelinha. 'Why won't happen?'

'Because we're going to figure out how to pass the challenge,' she s gently. 'We'll do that while Ana gets some sleep. Remember?'

'That's right,' Ester agrees. 'Ana, that's why you're not going to die some sleep.'

She says this like it's as simple as switching off a radio.

Maybe it is.

I want to join them at the table. I should help them figure out this challenge. But my body is shutting down. Hearing Dev's voice was too much. The medicine and the heat and the cramps are fighting for domi turning my nervous system into a choppy sea. I cling to the sound of m friends' voices like a life raft.

I close my eyes and drift into the painless depths.

going to be a challenge.'

I try to concentrate. The hot-water bottle is slowly doing its work, relaxing the knots in my belly, but the pain is still blinding. Dev's voice crackles in my head. *Major threat. Need everyone to EVACUATE.*

'A challenge?' I manage.

Ester nods. 'Standard protocol when someone approaches a base. It says so right here. I don't know what kind of challenge. Something to make sure we are legitimate. If we're not, the island will probably destroy us with alt-tech weapons.'

'But that won't happen,' Nelinha says.

'No,' Ester agrees. 'Because …' She looks at Nelinha. 'Why won't it happen?'

'Because we're going to figure out how to pass the challenge,' she says gently. 'We'll do that while Ana gets some sleep. Remember?'

'That's right,' Ester agrees. 'Ana, that's why you're not going to die. Get some sleep.'

She says this like it's as simple as switching off a radio.

Maybe it is.

I want to join them at the table. I should help them figure out this challenge. But my body is shutting down. Hearing Dev's voice was too much. The medicine and the heat and the cramps are fighting for dominance, turning my nervous system into a choppy sea. I cling to the sound of my friends' voices like a life raft.

I close my eyes and drift into the painless depths.



CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

In my dream, it's the Fourth of July. I'm ten years old. I'm sprawled o blanket in the San Alejandro Botanical Gardens, waiting for the firewo start.

Dev dances around our family's picnic spot, waving a sparkler. My sits next to me, her face swallowed by the shadow of her broad-brimm straw hat. Her black pearl gleams at the base of her throat. She wriggle bare toes (she always hated shoes) in time with the John Philip Sousa r being piped over the loudspeakers.

She reclines against my father's chest. His arm circles her waist. Th show of affection makes me vaguely embarrassed. Are parents *allowe* cuddle in public?

My father's white shirt, white linen slacks and glass of white wine a to glow in the dusk. His slick black hair is perfectly combed. His *Mon* like smile makes him look like he's just woken from a beautiful reveri

My mother gazes out over the field of poppies, sunflowers and baby eyes that lead down to the lake. She sighs contentedly. 'When I die, sp my ashes in the water here. I like the view.'

'Mom!' I say.

She laughs gently. 'My dear, dying is nothing to be embarrassed ab happens to everyone.'

'Okay, but can we not talk about it now?'

She gives me a playful pinch on the arm. 'Ana, it's good to be hones such things. Besides, I'm just saying … this would be a nice place to r peace.'

'But you're not dying!'

‘What?’ Dev stops his sparkler dance and marches over, on high ale scandal. ‘Who’s dying?’

The sparkler sheds a cascade of golden starbursts across his bare arn doesn’t seem to notice.

‘No one is dying,’ my father assures us. ‘At least, not until after I’ve finished my chardonnay.’ His eyes gleam with humour. They’re deep l like the centres of the sunflowers. ‘I’m with your mother, though. Whe time comes, sprinkle my ashes here, too, will you?’

I’m about to protest that they are being impossibly morbid, when the fireworks explode overhead …

I wake in my bunk. Judging from the angle of the sunlight through t windows, I’ve slept through the whole evening and night.

My whole body aches, and my skull is throbbing. Ester and Nelinha nowhere to be seen. They must have wanted to give me the chance to s in.

Dying is nothing to be embarrassed about. It happens to everyone.

Oh, Mom …

I couldn’t even honour her wish. We had no ashes to sprinkle in any Now I have nothing but my mother’s pearl. Even getting *that* back was miracle. It was delivered to us by the school, with deepest condolences only thing they could retrieve after the ‘accident’.

I’m tempted to lie in my bed and wallow in misery, but I know that only make things worse. I’ve found out the hard way that with grief, li menstrual cramps, I just need to keep moving. And today’s the day we supposed to reach the secret base. If there is such a thing …

I get myself cleaned up and dressed. No shower. We’re rationing wa Breakfast is a seaweed protein bar. We’re rationing food, too.

Finally, I arrive on the bridge.

Nobody gives me a hard time for showing up late. Still, I feel guilty our supplies dwindling, the tension on board is as charged as a Leyden For the sake of the crew, I need to be operating at a hundred percent. C least to *pretend* that I am.

Our challenge arrives at 10:00 a.m., sharp.

The LOCUS display lights up with a swarm of purple splotches.

‘Aircraft!’ yells Jack Wu. ‘Wait. No … What *are* those?’

The purple blobs flicker in and out, changing shape and intensity. O LOCUS, they appear to be aerial objects, hovering directly in front of t

Varuna, but when I look out of the forward windows, there's nothing b open water all the way to the horizon.

Jack senses the answer before I do. He's the best in House Dolphin a kind of thing.

'Those aren't physical objects,' he realizes. 'See how the blobs are flattening into waves?'

I nod. 'Clever.'

'What?' Dru Cardenas demands, his voice jumpy. 'Are we under att

He looks like he desperately wants to shoot something with his shin Leyden cannon. Even by Shark standards, Dru is trigger-happy. I decic should give him a task that does not involve weapons.

'There's no attack,' I assure him. 'At least, not yet. Would you roun the other Dolphins and bring them to the bridge, please? We've got a c break.'

A few minutes later, Virgil stumbles in, groggy and squinting from working the graveyard shift. Lee-Ann and Halimah follow on his heels the time all five of us are together, Jack and I have identified the break the pattern starts repeating. We have also discovered how to feed the LOCUS's electrical impulses into the bridge's speakers, converting the glowing purple squiggles into sounds.

Halimah tilts her head. 'Blue whale?'

'Partly,' I say. 'But it's more complicated than that. Keep listening.'

HP has used blue-whale song as a code for years. The pitches, swee lengths of tone can be pegged to components of human languages, mal multilayered form of encryption that is almost impossible to break if y don't know the key.

But this code is more complicated still.

After a few seconds, the pattern changes. A series of clicks like a do coda overlays the whale song. Two seconds later, the clicks and song a replaced by tones like wind through a conch horn.

Then the pattern repeats.

'The sender knows HP encryption methods,' Jack ventures. 'They m assume we have a LOCUS to receive their transmission.'

'That's good, right?' Lee-Ann says. 'It must be from our base.'

'Unless it's a trap,' Virgil says. 'If this is from the *Aronnax*, and we …'

That's a fun thought.

I find myself shaking my head. ‘No. This must be the base. We were expecting a challenge –’

‘We were?’ asks Halimah.

I tell them about Ester’s warning from last night. ‘So if this is the challenge, and we *don’t* respond, that will not be good. Either way, we to decipher the code. Then we can decide what to do.’

My housemates visibly relax. Deciphering a code … *that* is a challe can tackle. It’s what Dolphins train for.

‘Let’s assume the first part is blue whale.’ Jack whips out his pencil notepad. He starts sketching the purple blobs and waves. He says he th better when he’s working by hand, and since he’s our best codebreake never argue. ‘That second part, with the clicks … Can we slow that do

‘Uh …’ I’m no Cephalopod, but after a few minutes of tinkering, I r to replay the transmission at one-quarter speed, which makes the patte clear. ‘That’s five by five.’

I don’t realize Gem is standing behind me until he asks, ‘What’s fiv five?’

I almost jump out of my socks. Seriously, I’m going to have to put b his holsters so he can’t sneak up on me like that.

‘It’s like Morse code,’ I explain. ‘But different. In the Vietnam War prisoners of war used it to tap out messages to one another.’

‘And the third section,’ Halimah says. ‘What is that?’

We gather around the map table and play the recording over and ove different speeds. Jack fills his notebook with sketches and mathematic equations. Halimah and Virgil argue about phonetic versus alphabetic symbology. Lee-Ann lectures us on the relationship between acoustics fluid dynamics. It’s basically a giant Dolphin nerd fest.

I don’t realize how much time has passed until Gem sets a tray of sandwiches in front of us. ‘Lunch.’

While the others eat, I take a bathroom break. I freshen up, splash w my face, take more medicine. My gut pain is now competing with back from being hunched over for so long, looking at codes. I consider thro up but suppress the impulse by sheer force of will. Once I give in to na the vomit genie is not easy to put back in the bottle.

On the way to the bridge, I freeze in my tracks. Suddenly all the pie code that have been swirling around in my brain fall into a perfect patt live for these moments. They’re as exhilarating as cliff-diving, and the

the main reason I love being a Dolphin. Jack's a better cryptographer. Halimah is more gifted at navigation. Lee-Ann has a stronger grasp of counterespionage, and Virgil is our expert at electronic communicatior I'm the best at putting all the pieces together to make a bigger picture. why I was elected the freshman prefect.

With a grin on my face, I march back to the bridge. 'I've got it.'

I walk my housemates through the code. The first section, the blue-v song, is an algorithm for decrypting the second section, which is the ac message. The third section provides phonetic clues that tell us the lang used in that message: Bundeli, a derivation of Hindi, which happens to ancestral tongue and the native dialect of Captain Nemo.

'Wow.' Halimah nods appreciatively. 'Nice work, Ana.'

'No kidding,' Virgil says. 'I thought I was going to go crazy if we li to that recording one more time. I wish I had your ear.'

I try not to feel too pleased with myself. 'I just put together what yo did. Jack, can you –?'

Jack's mouth is full of peanut-butter sandwich, but he starts scribbli translating the coded message into English.

He hands the notepad to Lee-Ann to read.

She clears her throat dramatically. 'And the winner is … "*This is Li Base. Identify. Five hours.*"'

Halimah frowns. 'That was a lot of work for a really short message.

'Île Lincoln,' Gem chimes in. 'That's what Harding and Pencroft na the island where they were stranded.'

The Dolphins turn and stare at him.

'What?' he asks. 'I read *The Mysterious Island*, too.'

I study the LOCUS display. It's still riddled with purple blotches lik pattern from a shotgun blast. My nerves tingle. Our situation finally sta feel *real*. We're getting close to the island of Captain Nemo … The pla where my parents died.

'*Identify.*' Lee-Ann drums her fingers on the table. 'That part is clea enough. They want to know who we are. *Five hours* … Is that our time arrival?'

'It would be two hours now,' Gem says. 'You guys were working or code for three hours.'

That seems impossible. But, according to the ship's chronometer, G right. It's one in the afternoon. I remember the coordinates I got from t

super-secret map in the captain's stateroom. I do some quick calculatic based on our current course and speed.

'It's not our ETA,' I decide. 'We shouldn't arrive at the island until p.m. The *five-hour* thing is an ultimatum. We need to figure out how t answer this challenge. And we need to do it in the next two hours.'

Virgil gulps. 'And if we don't respond in time, or respond the right

'Then,' I say, 'I imagine our own secret base will blow us out of the water.'

super-secret map in the captain's stateroom. I do some quick calculations based on our current course and speed.

'It's not our ETA,' I decide. 'We shouldn't arrive at the island until seven p.m. The *five-hour* thing is an ultimatum. We need to figure out how to answer this challenge. And we need to do it in the next two hours.'

Virgil gulps. 'And if we don't respond in time, or respond the right way?'

'Then,' I say, 'I imagine our own secret base will blow us out of the water.'



CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

But no pressure.

It's one thing to decrypt a message. It's much harder to figure out th correct answer and say it back in the same code. And we have less tha hours to do it.

Maybe Lincoln Base – if it really *is* Lincoln Base – has a machine th generates messages in blue whale/five by five/Bundeli. We do not. No have access to that superweapon of information, the internet, which mi help us put together the pieces.

We have to trust our own training and best guesses.

That's terrifying.

'Virgil,' I say, 'do you still have that simulator app on your phone, t that makes whale songs?'

He stares at me in surprise. 'I – Yeah!'

'Will it work without an internet connection?'

'Of course.' He sounds mildly offended. 'I downloaded the whole li of whale songs.'

This doesn't surprise me. I have spent years teasing Virgil about the number of useless apps on his phone. Now I owe him a huge apology.

'Virgil, you're amazing,' I say. 'Gem, go with him to open the lockb Just make sure that phone stays *offline*.'

I doubt they could get a signal anyway, and neither Virgil nor Gem s like the type to try sneaking a look at TikTok in the middle of the Paci I feel I should remind them.

Gem nods, and off they go.

Meanwhile, Jack runs to get Nelinha. Once the two of them are back start puzzling out how to use the LOCUS to send messages rather than receive.

Lee-Ann runs computations for a new encryption base. We can't sim send back the same whale-song algorithm. That would be too easy. If i HP base we're talking to, they'll expect us to keep the format but chan register, like modulating to a new key in the middle of a song.

Halimah and I brainstorm expressions in Bundeli that we might wan send. We start with *DO NOT FIRE*. We figure that will be important.

Virgil and Gem return with the phone. Virgil starts playing whale so which isn't annoying at all. Gem serves as our timekeeper, periodically letting us know how much longer we have until we are blown to bits. A not the least bit annoying.

After an hour and a half, my eyesight is starting to blur. A line of sw trickles down my back and sticks my shirt to my skin like superglue. W the finishing touches on our transmission, coding the phonetic compon into the sweeps and pitches of whale song, as if blue whales sang in Bu

The message says *VARUNA FROM HP. DO NOT FIRE. EMERGEN SITUATION. ANA DAKKAR ON BOARD.*

At least, I hope that's what it says. At this point, my brain is so mush message could say *TOFU IS MY FAVOURITE MAMMAL* and I would know the difference.

I feel self-conscious using my name as part of the response. The oth Dolphins have convinced me it's necessary. They figure that if I'm rea valuable, my presence on board might keep anyone – friends or enemi from torpedoing us with alt-tech death weapons.

'Unless we're talking to an automated relay,' Virgil muses. 'If it's lo for a specific code word, and we don't send it –'

'Then we've come a long way just to get killed,' Halimah says.

'There's that can-do Dolphin spirit I love,' I say.

It's a long-running joke among us. Combined, we're fluent in, like, dozen languages, but we have no word for *optimism*.

Nobody smiles. The stakes are too high.

I turn to Nelinha. 'Are we good to transmit?'

'As far as I can tell.' She sounds cheerful. She's chosen a festive tan shade of lip gloss and eyeshadow to go with her green skirt and orange hoodie. I swear her go bag must be an extra-dimensional space to

accommodate all her outfits. ‘Of course, the transmitter might not wor
we might give away our position to the *Aronnax*. But we have to try ne
things, right?’

Gem coughs. He’s wearing his usual commando black, standing nex
Nelinha, so together the two of them look like a printer-ink test page.
‘Twenty minutes until the reply deadline,’ he says.

‘Permission to send?’ Lee-Ann asks.

I hesitate. ‘Not yet. Gather the crew. They deserve to know what’s
happening.’

The afternoon sun beats down on the main deck. I tell the assembled
about the challenge, the response we’ve prepared and the 273 things th
could possibly go wrong.

‘When we send this signal,’ I say, ‘we’ll be revealing our location. W
have to gamble that this isn’t a trap, and that we’ve evaded our enemie
still feels strange referring to Land Institute as our *enemies*, but there’s
nothing else to call them. We’re way past toilet-papering each other’s s
buses now. ‘Also, if we send the message and it’s not correct, we could
under attack in fifteen minutes.’

‘Eleven,’ Gem says.

‘Thank you, Prefect Twain,’ I say dryly.

Some of our classmates crack a smile. I guess nervous humour is go

‘If, however,’ I continue, ‘we *are* communicating with an HP base, t
we could be among friends by this evening.’

An anxious murmur goes through the group. After three days at sea,
old lives seem far away. It’s starting to feel unbelievable that anyone w
not on this boat could exist, much less be a ‘friend’. Nevertheless, no o
protests. No one asks questions. At this point, in the middle of the ocea
almost no supplies left, what choice do we have?

‘Prefect Romero,’ I say.

‘Captain.’

I blink. This is the first time anyone has called me *captain*. I’m not s
how I feel about that. ‘All hands for general quarters. Nelinha?’

‘Yes, babycakes?’

That gets some laughter. I silently thank Nelinha for having an
insubordinate sense of humour. It’s been a long time since any of us ha
good laugh. Besides, *babycakes* doesn’t sound any more ridiculous to r
than *captain*.

‘Send the message,’ I tell her. ‘If anyone needs to use the head, now be a good time.’

The crew disperses. All things considered, their spirits seem high. I haven’t led them astray.

I hit the bathroom. I change maxi-pads, take a couple of painkillers throw up. Today is a great day.

I get back to the bridge just as Nelinha sends the message.

Ester and Top have joined us for the big moment.

Gem fidgets like he’s got a jellyfish in his shirt. Like Ester, he’s one those people who thinks *on time* means *thirty minutes early*. It must be him that we’re cutting things so close to the deadline.

We wait for a response.

I remind myself to breathe.

I imagine ballistic missiles hurtling over the horizon, zeroing in on position. I remember the trident-shaped wake lines of the torpedoes tha destroyed our school. I picture a full complement of alt-tech sonic fish burrowing through the water towards our hull.

Nothing happens.

Then, suddenly … still nothing happens.

Five more minutes pass. More nothing.

The minutes turn into an hour. Funny how that happens when you p of them together.

The afternoon sun slants through the forward windows. This turns th bridge into an Easy-Bake Oven. Sweat trickles down my neck. Ester’s the colour of a boiled crab. Even Nelinha’s perfect make-up is starting melt. Top finishes his second bowl of water and continues panting like (I don’t think he understands water rationing.)

Outside, Dru and Kiya man the Leyden cannon. They look miserabl their life vests and tactical gear.

The sea ahead remains flat and empty, except for Socrates, who lead way like a pilot fish. Occasionally he leaps out of the water, turning as breaches. He looks back at us with his sideways smile. I imagine him thinking, *Come on, guys! If you get blown up or whatever, it’s fine! I’l safe!*

‘We’re still alive,’ Ester notes. ‘That’s good. Maybe we passed the t

I hope she’s right. I was sort of hoping for confirmation, though. A glowing smiley face on the LOCUS display would’ve been sufficient.

would confetti. The silence is unnerving.

The sun is just touching the horizon when I order engines to a full st

hope I The weather is clear. If there was an island anywhere close to us, we should be able to see it. This was supposed to be our destination. There

and nothing here.

My mouth feels like rice paper.

'Send the message again,' I tell Nelinha.

This time, she doesn't call me *babycakes*. Everyone on the bridge w

of grim expression.

killing The second transmission has no obvious effect.

We float in the calm of the sunset. Out on the foredeck, Dru and Kiy to the west, their cannon forgotten.

I curse myself for believing in Dr Hewett's pseudoscience map. I ac

our thought I could safely captain a 120-foot training yacht with a crew of

at freshmen into the middle of the Pacific and find a place that doesn't ex any nautical chart.

I think about what to tell the crew. With no food or water, how long we last? If we put out an SOS, will anyone hear us? Will anybody reac time?

I mentally kick myself for not preparing a Plan B. I've sentenced us

ut sixty death.

'Guys …' I'm not sure what to say to my bridge crew. How do you

ne apologize for such a massive failure?

face is 'LOOK!' Ester yells.

to Directly off our bow, the air ripples. It's as if a mile-wide curtain of

crazy. mirrors has been reflecting the sea. Now the curtain shatters.

The island takes my breath away.

e in The central volcanic peak rises three hundred feet, jagged and crumbl a heap of burnt brown sugar. Surrounding it is a turquoise lagoon, ring

ls the an atoll maybe a mile in diameter, with sandy white beaches hugging a

he of thick vegetation. Off our starboard side, a break in the atoll forms a gateway into the lagoon.

l be No dynamic camouflage in the world should be good enough to ren island invisible at point-blank range. Yet here it is.

est.' 'We did it,' Gem marvels.

giant A woman's voice crackles over our intercom. '*Varuna*, this is Linco

Or Base.'

She sounds a bit cranky. ‘Your visit was not scheduled. Stand by for harbour drone guidance. Make any sign of aggressive intent, and you w destroyed. If we do not see Ana Dakkar aboard, safe and unharmed, yo be destroyed.’

Okay. Maybe she sounds a *lot* cranky.

A garbled noise comes over the feed, as if someone else is speaking in the background.

‘Fine,’ the woman growls slightly off mic. Then to us: ‘You will adv drone how many will be joining us for dinner. Jupiter is baking lasagn Lincoln Base out.’

She sounds a bit cranky. ‘Your visit was not scheduled. Stand by for harbour drone guidance. Make any sign of aggressive intent, and you will be destroyed. If we do not see Ana Dakkar aboard, safe and unharmed, you will be destroyed.’

Okay. Maybe she sounds a *lot* cranky.

A garbled noise comes over the feed, as if someone else is speaking to her in the background.

‘Fine,’ the woman growls slightly off mic. Then to us: ‘You will advise the drone how many will be joining us for dinner. Jupiter is baking lasagne. Lincoln Base out.’



CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Given the choice between destruction or lasagne, I will choose lasagne time.

Whoever Jupiter is, I hope he can cook enough for twenty extra peo (Dr Hewett makes twenty-one, but his diet is presently being administe through an IV.)

I scan the lagoon entrance for the pilot drone. I guess I'm expecting something large, like a tugboat. I don't even see the drone until it buzz my ear and settles on the navigation console.

An alt-tech dragonfly flutters its copper-and-crystal wings. Its segm eyes gleam like tiny Fabergé eggs. I'm glad no one tried to swat it. I'm sure that would count as a sign of aggressive intent.

Top barks.

The drone turns its head and makes a *pop* of static electricity betwee front legs. Top whimpers and hides behind Ester.

'Hi, there,' I tell the dragonfly. I try to sound calm, like I talk to mechanical bugs every day. 'I'm Ana Dakkar. As you can see, I'm saf unharmed. We have a crew of twenty for dinner, please. Also, we need medical care for Dr Hewett. He's comatose in the sickbay.'

The dragonfly wriggles its antennae. A copper thread unspools from mouth and snakes its way into our auto-nav console.

'Okay,' Tia Romero mutters. 'I'm sure that's fine.'

The ship's engines rumble to life.

Pilot Bug steers us to starboard and guides us into the lagoon.

We have arrived in a heavily weaponized paradise.

Along the perimeter of the atoll, turret guns peek from the brambles swivel to follow our progress. Targeting lasers wink and flicker along hull. Whatever projectors control the island's impressive camouflage s I imagine they are also hidden in the vegetation.

I've spent the last three days struggling to believe this place could e Now that we're here, I still can't believe it.

Socrates, fearless as usual, leads the way into the lagoon. Two local dolphins swim over to meet him. Within moments, they are leaping ar together, chattering happily. So much for my friend being a loner.

The water is so clear that I can see a labyrinth of jagged reefs below surface. Schools of tropical fish swirl through the evening light like jet coloured paint. I want to dive in that lagoon so badly I can feel the ach my teeth.

We cruise towards the central volcanic isle. It has no shore to speak just dark cliffs that plunge straight into the lagoon. The only sign of habitation is a single wooden dock, with a small shack anchored at the of the rocks. The structure looks so flimsy I imagine it would break of first strong storm. It certainly doesn't look big enough for twenty peop

Nevertheless, Pilot Bug guides us towards it. Twenty feet out, it cut engines.

'Tia, make ready the moorings,' I say. 'Pilot Bug, permission to con ashore?'

The drone retracts its wire tongue, spits another spark of electricity flies away. I decide to take that as a yes.

The crew ties off the *Varuna*. I'm the first one off the ship, followed Gem, Ester and Top.

On the pier, I have the same sense of disorientation I always get wh ashore. My legs try to compensate for the lack of rolling and rocking. disconcerting. Solid land … I've never trusted it. I *definitely* don't afte happened to HP.

Gem's hands hover over his holsters. 'What now?'

The shack's door flies open with a *bang!* I step in front of Gem to k him from drawing his guns.

A tall, slender, dark-skinned man steps into the light. His white skin jeans and vertically striped soccer shirt accentuate his spindly limbs, m him look like an anime character – maybe one of the pirates from *One*

His close-cropped black hair is flecked with grey. His hands, sheathed
oven mitts, hold a steaming pan of bread that smells of butter and garli

My mouth starts watering.

'Ana Dakkar, yes?' He has a friendly smile. 'You look just like you
parents.'

I've been told this a million times before, but after the stress of the l
days, and what happened with Dev, the comment hits me in the gut. It
me a second to find my voice.

'I – Yes. This is the freshman class of Harding-Pencroft. We have s
bad –'

'Freshman class?' The bread pirate laughs. 'What in the world!' I ca
quite place his accent until he says, 'I'm Luca Barsanti.'

I switch to Italian. 'Piacere.'

'Ah, parli la lingua del bell'paese!'

'Certo, sono un Delfino.'

'Ottimo! Prego, entrate tutti! Anche povero Hewett, portatelo. La m
prossima pagnotta di pane sta bruciando!'

He plunges back inside.

'Um … What just happened?' Gem asks.

'He says come on in, and bring Hewett,' I translate. 'His next loaf o
bread is burning.'

His close-cropped black hair is flecked with grey. His hands, sheathed in oven mitts, hold a steaming pan of bread that smells of butter and garlic.

My mouth starts watering.

'Ana Dakkar, yes?' He has a friendly smile. 'You look just like your parents.'

I've been told this a million times before, but after the stress of the last few days, and what happened with Dev, the comment hits me in the gut. It takes me a second to find my voice.

'I – Yes. This is the freshman class of Harding-Pencroft. We have some bad –'

'Freshman class?' The bread pirate laughs. 'What in the world!' I can't quite place his accent until he says, 'I'm Luca Barsanti.'

I switch to Italian. 'Piacere.'

'Ah, parli la lingua del bell'paese!'

'Certo, sono un Delfino.'

'Ottimo! Prego, entrate tutti! Anche povero Hewett, portatelo. La mia prossima pagnotta di pane sta bruciando!'

He plunges back inside.

'Um … What just happened?' Gem asks.

'He says come on in, and bring Hewett,' I translate. 'His next loaf of garlic bread is burning.'



CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

I send the Orcas to get Dr Hewett from the sickbay.

Moving him will be risky. I'm not sure what kind of medical faciliti secret base has, but Barsanti said to bring him. I hope their cutting-edg can do more than camouflage the island and bake garlic bread.

'No aggressive moves,' I tell the rest of the crew.

The Sharks look at me like, *Who, us?*

It hits me that I just gave an order to my classmates, and they took n seriously. Three days ago, they would have laughed or ignored me, or very least teased me for acting like an authority figure. A lot has chang I'm not sure if that's good.

I lead the way into the shack, which turns out to be nothing but a so foyer. The rubber welcome mat reads BLESS THIS MESS. Against the left a stand-up shower. Against the right is a rack of dive masks, tanks, fin spearguns. A security camera peers down at us from the ceiling. At the of the room, a tunnel has been bored straight through the volcanic rock leading into the heart of the mountain.

I glimpse Barsanti's silhouette up ahead in the gloom. His voice ech back to us. 'I have turned off the lasers, so they should not cut you in h Please, come!'

At Ester's side, Top sniffs the air. He doesn't look worried – more li he's hoping for some of that bread. Top is usually a pretty good judge danger. I forge onward, following the scent of garlic butter.

After about a hundred feet, the corridor opens into a large rectangul space like an artist's loft. More corridors branch off in different directi

How big *is* this place?

The ceiling is lined with ventilation ducts and big industrial light fix The polished stone floor glistens like melted chocolate. Worktables ov with bits of disassembled alt-tech.

In the left corner, a living-room area has been set up. Two cushy sof make an L around a coffee table. A tyre swing hangs from the ceiling. (Why?) A jumbo television, attached to half a dozen gaming consoles, playing what looks like a cooking show. Stacks of Blu-rays are piled n the screen. I guess the island doesn't get satellite or streaming services

In the right corner of the room, a chandelier made of abalone shards glitters above a long metal dining table. Sitting alone at the far end is a diminutive woman with a magnificent mass of braided grey hair like a of barbed wire.

She's cross-legged and barefoot. Her thick steel-rimmed glasses glir the light of her laptop computer. Steel bangles decorate her forearms. I black leggings and yoga top don't look so much like athleisure wear as diabolical-acrobat costume.

She gives Barsanti a guarded glance, as if she's ready to press a very dangerous button on her laptop. 'Should I vaporize them?'

'No, no, they're friendly.' Barsanti holds up his bread pan. 'I must c the oven. Jupiter will kill me.'

'Fine.' The woman waves him away. She looks a bit disappointed.

Barsanti smiles at me. 'This is Ophelia, mia moglie. Please, make yourselves at home.'

He hurries off down one of the side corridors.

Ophelia rises. She is decidedly not tall. She pads over to us like the Ninja Leprechaun of Death. She appears ready to say something – perh explanation of how she will incinerate us if we misbehave – when our team arrives with Dr Hewett's stretcher.

Ophelia scowls at our comatose patient. After three days in the sickb looks terrible. He smells even worse.

'Theodosius, you idiot,' Ophelia grumbles. She snaps her fingers at Orcas. 'Come. No time to waste.'

We all start to follow, but Ophelia clicks her tongue. 'Just the medic thank you. The rest of you, wait here.'

Off they go down another corridor. Nelinha starts to drift towards or the worktables until Ophelia yells back, 'TOUCH NOTHING.'

The rest of us stand there uneasily, looking at one another like, *Well we are. Now what?*

‘*Make yourself at home!*’ Nelinha says, mimicking Luca Barsanti. T she switches to Ophelia’s voice: ‘*But touch nothing!*’

Robbie Barr sneezes. ‘Well, she didn’t say we couldn’t *look*. I’m go check out those game consoles.’

‘Me, too,’ Kay Ramsay says. ‘Whoa, is that a Nintendo 64?’

Gem gestures at his fellow Sharks. They fan out to examine the roo Nelinha and Meadow Newman conduct a purely visual inspection of t disassembled gadgets on the nearest table.

Halimah sidles up to me. ‘Cad a cheapann tú?’

The other Dolphins gather around.

‘I’m not sure,’ I answer, also in Irish, though I doubt any language i given the level of coding we had to do just to get in the front door. ‘Th seem friendly enough. If they were with Land Institute …’

I let that thought drift away unanchored. How would we know if we walked into a trap? I’m starting to wonder if I’ve made a terrible mista bringing us here …

Then Robbie Barr does the unthinkable. He stops the video playing TV.

I guess he assumed the *touch nothing* order didn’t apply to entertain options. As he rummages through the Blu-rays, an outraged howl erup one of the side corridors. A humanoid creature waddles into the room, flailing his furry orange arms. My god. It’s an orangutan. And he’s we cooking apron decorated with smiley-face daisies.

The orangutan bares his fangs at Robbie, then says in perfectly clea language, *NO TURN OFF MARY BERRY.*

The rest of us stand there uneasily, looking at one another like, *Well, here we are. Now what?*

‘*Make yourself at home!*’ Nelinha says, mimicking Luca Barsanti. Then she switches to Ophelia’s voice: ‘*But touch nothing!*’

Robbie Barr sneezes. ‘Well, she didn’t say we couldn’t *look*. I’m going to check out those game consoles.’

‘Me, too,’ Kay Ramsay says. ‘Whoa, is that a Nintendo 64?’

Gem gestures at his fellow Sharks. They fan out to examine the room. Nelinha and Meadow Newman conduct a purely visual inspection of the disassembled gadgets on the nearest table.

Halimah sidles up to me. ‘Cad a cheapann tú?’

The other Dolphins gather around.

‘I’m not sure,’ I answer, also in Irish, though I doubt any language is safe, given the level of coding we had to do just to get in the front door. ‘They seem friendly enough. If they were with Land Institute …’

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The orangutan bares his fangs at Robbie, then says in perfectly clear sign language, *NO TURN OFF MARY BERRY.*



CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

The Sharks reach for their guns.

'Stand down!' I yell.

Thankfully, they listen.

'Robbie,' I say, my heart pounding, 'put down the remote control ar
away.'

Not being an idiot, Robbie does so. I gesture at my friends to give th
orange newcomer some space.

The orangutan snatches up the remote control. He returns us to our
regularly scheduled programme, which appears to be a bunch of Britis
people sweating over the creation of bread puddings.

I approach the orangutan slowly. My hands are out to show they're
The orangutan seems unconcerned about being surrounded by armed h
He's no more than five feet tall, but he's still an impressive and scary-
guy. He probably weighs as much as I do. He's definitely got bigger te
His face – flat and round with a wispy orange beard – reminds me of p
book illustrations of the Man in the Moon. Fur cascades off his limbs l
orange fringe curtains. The name JUPITER is stitched onto his smiley-fa
daisy apron.

When he notices me, I sign, *We are sorry about the TV. I see you sp
sign language.*

His eyes are a beautiful dark brown, full of quiet intelligence. He sli
remote control into the pocket of his apron. Then he signs back, *You sp
Orangutan.*

I introduce myself as *A-N-A.* (I am fortunate to have an easy name t
I'm trying to figure out which of several dozen questions I want to ask

Luca Barsanti hurries back into the room without his cooking mitts or pan.

'Oh, dear,' he mutters. 'I see you have met Jupiter. Please never turn *The Great British Bake Off*. It is a religion for him, and Mary Berry is goddess.'

Jupiter climbs onto the couch. He stares at the screen intently as an British woman with perfect blond helmet-hair holds forth on the perils crusts.

'I remember this episode,' Gem says. 'Season three. They make frui

I raise an eyebrow.

'What?' Gem demands. 'It's good TV.'

Jupiter must understand some English. He studies Gem with obviou approval, then pats the cushion next to him. Gem, not wanting to offen chef with the large fangs, joins him on the couch.

Luca chuckles. 'Made a friend already. Good! Jupiter has watched e episode at least twenty times. I suppose it would be annoying if he didn create the recipes for us.'

Nelinha points at the orangutan, then the screen, then the orangutan. this is your lasagne guy …' Suddenly she doesn't sound anxious for di

'He's much more than the lasagne guy,' Luca assures her. 'He can n almost anything! He keeps trying to make me his sous chef, but I'm af oven is one machine I cannot master.'

'And … he's an orangutan.' Nelinha mentions this delicately, as if I might not have noticed.

'Of course!' Luca agrees. 'There has always been a Jupiter at Hardin Pencroft.'

Luca's words are almost exactly what Ester said about Top. With a shock, I remember that there was an orangutan in *The Mysterious Islan* Another Jupiter. This Jupiter must be his … What? Clone? Twentieth grand-monkey? Apparently, the Jupiters have evolved to the point whe can now communicate in fluent sign language and cook soufflés.

Luca turns to me, his brow furrowing with concern. 'Now, my dear, perhaps you should tell us why you are here. We weren't expecting yo brother for another four years. We weren't expecting you … well, *at a* Something must have gone very wrong.'

I'm sure he doesn't mean the words to hurt. They do anyway.

I grew up in Dev's shadow. Mostly I was okay with that. My parents loving and accepting, but they had some very old-fashioned ideas about firstborn son carrying on the family legacy. I was happy to let Dev be the Chosen One. It freed me to do whatever I wanted with my life – or so I thought.

Now there's a Dev-size void in the world and no way I can fill it. Luca Ophelia weren't planning on me being here, maybe *ever*. My presence sign that something terrible has happened.

I need to tell Luca the bad news: Dev is dead. Harding-Pencroft is g

My vocal cords refuse to make a sound.

I'm saved from answering when Ophelia returns from the sickbay. S marches over to us with Ester, Top and Rhys Morrow at her heels. Este face is puffy and red from crying. Rhys plays counsellor, whispering to a reassuring tone.

'Pancreatic cancer,' Ophelia tells me. Her gaze is as steely as her ha her glasses. 'Theodosius was a fool.'

My ribcage tightens. '*Was?*'

'No, no, he's still alive. Your friend Franklin is administering one o experimental treatments right now. I just meant Theodosius should've medical help months ago. What was he thinking, coming out here in hi condition with a crew of freshmen?'

She scowls at me, waiting for answers I don't have.

Top pads over to the couch. He sniffs Jupiter's toes. Jupiter just look down at the dog, pulls a cookie from the pocket of his apron and gives Top. Another friendship secured.

'I …' My voice falters. I've been trying to hold myself together for days. I can't break down now, not in front of my whole crew.

Gem gets up from the couch. He and Nelinha both gravitate to me, a sensing that I need backup.

'How about we sit and talk?' Gem suggests to our hosts, gesturing t dining table. His calm tone reminds me that Sharks are trained to be diplomats as well as soldiers.

'Good idea,' Nelinha says. That makes twice this week she has publ agreed with Gem, which probably means doomsday is nigh. 'The rest crew can secure the *Varuna*, maybe get themselves cleaned up. Right,

I nod, grateful for the help. It's better than me dissolving into ugly sobbing.

‘You could all use showers,’ Ophelia concedes.

I guess after three days at sea, rationing our fresh water, the twenty

don’t smell so great.

Ophelia makes a clicking sound at the side of her mouth, like she’s encouraging a horse. Two mechanical dragonflies buzz into the room a hover at her shoulders.

‘The drones will show your crew the facilities,’ she says. ‘They’ll al keep any naughty children from straying into restricted areas and getti themselves killed.’

‘I’ll get the espresso and biscotti.’ Luca’s smile turns fragile, as if h suspects it might break under the weight of our story. ‘I have a feeling might need a pre-dinner pick-me-up.’

‘You could all use showers,’ Ophelia concedes.

I guess after three days at sea, rationing our fresh water, the twenty of us don’t smell so great.

Ophelia makes a clicking sound at the side of her mouth, like she’s encouraging a horse. Two mechanical dragonflies buzz into the room and hover at her shoulders.

‘The drones will show your crew the facilities,’ she says. ‘They’ll also keep any naughty children from straying into restricted areas and getting themselves killed.’

‘I’ll get the espresso and biscotti.’ Luca’s smile turns fragile, as if he suspects it might break under the weight of our story. ‘I have a feeling we might need a pre-dinner pick-me-up.’



CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

It never gets easier, talking about what happened to Harding-Pencroft.

When I explain how my brother died, I feel like I'm collecting ashes his funeral pyre, clawing through the hot cinders of his life with my ba hands.

Gem and Nelinha sit on either side of me. Ester, still quietly snifflin on Nelinha's right. I don't know if Ester is crying because of Dr Hewe condition, or the loss of the school, or the scary new place and new pe she is having to deal with. All are solid reasons.

As usual, the other two prefects should be in on this conversation, b seem content to let Ester and Nelinha be their stand-ins. Franklin rema the sickbay, tending to Dr Hewett. Tia Romero, bless her, is playing a everybody. She's herding the rest of the crew around, making sure the get zapped by lasers or mechanical dragonflies as they settle into the b

When I'm done with my story, Luca and Ophelia give each other a l look. They don't seem surprised by anything I've told them. Their expressions convey grim vindication, as if they've been fearing this ne years.

Ophelia adjusts her steel-rimmed glasses. She sets her elbows on the and laces her fingers, letting her bangles cascade down her forearms. ' I'm so sorry. You deserved better from us.'

Her tone surprises me almost as much as her apology. She sounds a and bitter, which makes me realize how much of those emotions I've b holding inside for the past three days. I swallow back the taste of bile. it's a welcome change from debilitating sorrow.

‘What *did* I deserve?’ I ask. ‘Maybe the truth?’

Luca frowns into his cup of espresso. ‘Certo. La veritá. Ma non è co semplice, cara mia.’

‘Why not?’ I demand. ‘It seems pretty simple to me. Why did Dev h keep silent about what he knew? Why did Ester have to live with her secrets?’

Ester blushes.

I realize maybe I should not have put her on the spot like that, whicl makes me scowl even harder at Ophelia. ‘And do *not* tell me the schoo trying to protect me.’

Ophelia shakes her head. ‘No, Ana. The school was trying to protect itself.’

‘And you went along with it.’

Gem clears his throat, a subtle warning that my tone is getting aggre I’m not sure why I’m so angry at Luca and Ophelia. I barely know the They’ve been kind to us so far, aside from the threats of annihilation.

With a sigh, Luca dips a biscotto in his espresso. ‘Ana, when your p died … Ophelia and I were here with them. We were part of their team

I look down at my own coffee and cookie. I want to smash the bisco a million pieces, but I’m pretty sure Jupiter baked it from scratch and I want to offend the orangutan.

‘What happened?’ I manage to ask.

Luca’s jaw muscles ripple under his dark skin. ‘The truth? We are st sure. We should have been more careful. You understand, after four generations of Dakkars searching, your father finally found this place. mother and he were determined to move forward.’

‘You mean to explore the wreck of the sub,’ I say.

Luca hesitates long enough for the coffee to soak halfway up his bis ‘We tried to urge caution. Ophelia did, mostly … But this was like tell someone who had just found the Holy Grail not to drink from it. Your were sure they could handle the dive. And after … after the accident …

Luca lowers his head.

Nelinha understands before I do. ‘You blame yourselves,’ she says. were friends.’

Ophelia puts her hand on her husband’s shoulder. ‘The four of us graduated together from Harding-Pencroft.’ She turns to me. ‘When Ta

and Sita died, some of the faculty at HP wanted to bring you and your here immediately … for safekeeping. Theodosius Hewett was one of th

'We did not agree,' Luca says. 'We thought it was too dangerous. It too dangerous. We wished you both to have more training, more years on the mainland before you had to face the legacy of Nemo. We didn't Land Institute would ever risk such a brazen attack and put you and De risk. You were simply too important. But now that your brother …' Lu voice cracks. 'It seems we were wrong. I am so sorry.'

My head buzzes, and it's not just from the caffeine.

I try to imagine what it would have been like if Dev and I had spent two years on this island. I never would have met Nelinha or Ester. I wo be a Dolphin prefect. I would've had more time with Dev, but we wou spent it in this subterranean base, in the middle of nowhere, where our parents died.

I can't blame Luca and Ophelia for not wanting that. Still, a fist-size of anger burns in my chest. Dev and I weren't given the choice. If this our family's inheritance, if the alt-tech is *ours*, what right did Harding-Pencroft have to hide it from us? Why do they get to control our lives?

I remember what Caleb South said about Harding-Pencroft keeping secrets: *How many world problems could you cowards have solved if y* shared*?*

I wonder if Caleb had a point. Is Harding-Pencroft really so much be than Land Institute?

Ophelia seems to read my thoughts. 'You have no reason to trust us, we will trust you, Ana. You are the last Dakkar. Theodosius clearly th you were capable, and you did manage to bring your crew safely to Li Base.'

Luca gives his wife a troubled glance. 'Are you suggesting …?'

'Yes,' Ophelia says. 'We will show Ana everything. Let her decide.

Gem's chair creaks as he sits forward. 'What exactly is *everything*?'

He does a pretty good job keeping the excitement out of his voice. S like any good Shark, he is probably dreaming of shiny new weapons.

Ophelia's gaze stays on me. 'You understand that the alt-tech device have seen so far – the Leyden guns, the dynamic camouflage – are only imitations of Nemo's technology. Over the last century and a half, both and Land Institute have tried to re-create what Nemo did. We've had a other successes: the microwave, fibre-optics, lasers, nuclear fission.'

‘The microwave?’ Nelinha looks stunned. I can’t imagine her surviv without the microwave oven in our rec room at HP. She does love her popcorn.

Ophelia musters a faint smile. ‘Yes. One of Nemo’s less dangerous inventions. By the late 1940s, we felt it was safe to leak that technolog the general public.’

‘Hold on,’ Gem says. ‘Nuclear fission? You’re telling us Captain Ne had atomic bombs?’

Ophelia smirks. ‘Of course not. He would never have created such c clumsy weapons. But he did pioneer nuclear physics. During World W Land Institute decided they could “improve” the world by leaking som Nemo’s knowledge to help along the Manhattan Project. They still ma they did a good thing, even though the subsequent Cold War arms race close to destroying the world half a dozen times.’

‘Okay …’ Gem says slowly. ‘But that tech also led to nuclear powe cancer treatments and long-range space exploration, right? Tech can be *and* bad.’

Luca puts his hand over Ophelia’s wrist, as if he’s afraid she might j over the table and strangle Gem.

‘My boy,’ Luca says, ‘every time an alt-tech advance is leaked to th of the world, it is incredibly destabilizing. Nuclear fission is just one example. Can you imagine if we told the world that Nemo knew the se cold fusion?’

Nelinha takes a sharp breath.

I’m not as much of a hard-science expert, but even *I* understand how deal that would be. Fission breaks apart heavy atoms to make energy, l also creates a bunch of nasty radioactive waste. Fusion is the opposite. combines atoms. It’s the force that powers the sun. If humans could lea harness that process at room temperature, ‘cold’ fusion, they could ma unlimited energy and produce nothing but harmless gases for exhaust.

‘Why would you not share that information?’ I ask. ‘It would revolu the world.’

‘Or *destroy* the world,’ Ophelia counters. ‘Imagine a world governm monopolizing that power. Even worse, a corporation.’

That sends a shiver down my back. ‘You’re saying the secret to cold is here on this base.’

‘That secret,’ Luca agrees, ‘and many others. But we cannot unlock or study them, much less reproduce them, because Nemo keyed his masterpiece to his own family’s blood – *your* blood.’

The ball of anger in my chest begins to cool and shrink, creating its little cold-fusion reaction. ‘Nemo’s masterpiece …’ I say. ‘You don’t r the base. You mean the *Nautilus*.’

Luca and Ophelia remain silent.

I shake my head in disbelief. ‘But it’s a wreck.’

I think about photos I’ve seen from the resting place of the *Titanic*: a broken metal shell covered with rusticles, slowly crumbling to dust. A ship went down something like fifty years after the *Nautilus.* ‘There ca much left. It was sitting on the bottom of the ocean for a century and a

‘No, my dear.’ Luca sounds melancholy, like this news is even wors the destruction of Harding-Pencroft. ‘Your parents found the *Nautilus* Tomorrow, we will introduce you.’

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‘No, my dear.’ Luca sounds melancholy, like this news is even worse than the destruction of Harding-Pencroft. ‘Your parents found the *Nautilus* intact. Tomorrow, we will introduce you.’



CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

How to make twenty freshmen hyperactive:

1. Give them access to an espresso machine.
2. Offer them a safe haven after seventy-two hours of running from
3. Feed them a home-cooked meal made by an orangutan.
4. Tell them that tomorrow, they will get to see a make-believe subm from the 1800s that is actually not make-believe.

Luca insists that we will not talk any further about the *Nautilus* until morning. Even though I am burning with questions, I suppose that's ju well. My head already feels like it is going to explode from too much impossibility.

How could a submarine survive intact underwater for over 150 years what does Luca mean by *intact*? The shell is recognizable? The inside completely flooded? Most of all, what does he mean about 'introducing to the sub? He makes it sound almost like … No, I'm not going to follo line of thinking. It's crazy.

During dinner, only ten of us can fit around the dining table. The res crew spreads out through the main room. They sit wherever they can, t nobody is brave enough to try Jupiter's tyre swing.

The volume of conversation increases. I hear occasional laughter. M classmates joke with one another, looking as relaxed and happy as I've them since before our world was destroyed. If I close my eyes, I can al believe I'm back in the Harding-Pencroft cafeteria on an average schoo night.

My melancholy starts spiralling out of control, until Jupiter places a steaming plate of lasagne in front of me. He's added a beautiful mixed on the side, along with two slightly burnt pieces of garlic bread.

He points at Luca. *The bread was his fault.*

Thank you, I sign.

Jupiter picks up my napkin and puts it in my lap. Because, like most primates, he knows more about dining etiquette than I do.

The smell of the lasagne makes my mouth water. Cheese and tomato bubble between golden sheets of pasta.

I turn to Luca. 'I don't want to insult Jupiter's cooking, but this does have any beef, does it? You know, Hindu.'

Luca chuckles good-naturedly. 'No beef. In the early days of the *Na* Nemo and his crew hunted sea animals for meat, but, as he got older, N became what we would call a vegan. He realized that was better for the ocean. He cultivated his own hybrid crops in subaquatic gardens down A momentary shadow passes over his face, as if he realizes he's said something he shouldn't. 'In the water nearby. Many of those crops wer They're still flourishing today. Everything on your plate is from those gardens.'

On his other side, Ester sniffs a piece of her garlic bread. 'Even this'

'Well, not the garlic itself,' Luca concedes. 'I keep my own above-g garden on the atoll for herbs and spices that are difficult to simulate. B everything else, yes. White seaweed flour, sodium bicarbonate and aci the yeast –'

'What about butter and cheese?' I ask.

'Specially processed macroalgae and carrageen-moss extract.'

'Yum?' Nelinha says from across the table.

Ophelia nudges her arm. 'Give it a try.'

Nelinha nibbles the bread. Her eyes widen. 'Actually, yum! It's a lit burnt, but –'

'Okay, enough of that!' Luca says.

Ophelia grins, which makes her look less steely, more … I don't kn *silvery*. 'Anything Jupiter sees on *The Great British Bake Off*, or any o other cooking shows, we can simulate with sea-plant products. The ora keeps us on our toes.'

I try the lasagne. It tastes even better than it smells. 'You could feed world with those crops.'

Ophelia raises an index finger in warning. ‘Or we could feed the bot
salad line of multinational corporations who would want to exploit the food
– or more likely strangle them – to keep their monopolies.’

Suddenly my dinner tastes a bit more like macroalgae.

Top sits patiently at Ester’s feet. He doesn’t beg – he’s too clever fo
: higher He just looks cute and sad, staring into the distance as if thinking, *Alas
poor stomach!* Whenever someone slips him a scrap, which happens
› sauce frequently, he looks surprised. *For me? Well, if you insist.*

He is part emotional-support animal, part con artist.

sn’t Meanwhile, Jupiter circulates among the Dolphins, chatting with the
sign language. He describes the culinary wonders they are enjoying. S
utilus, his cooking lingo is hard to follow. I have never learned the sign-langu
Nemo terms for *sauté* or *carrageen moss*. Still, the Dolphins know how to say
e *delicious* and *thank you*. That seems to please him.
in …’ Gem sops up the last of his lasagne with his garlic bread. ‘So, Dr Ba
–’

nt wild. ‘Luca, please.’

Gem shifts uncomfortably. He likes formalities. ‘Er, did you and Dr

‘My surname is Artemesia,’ says Ophelia, ‘but call me Ophelia.’

?’ Gem manages to process this without bursting a blood vessel. ‘Uh, O
ground and Luca … you said you both went to Harding-Pencroft?’

ut Luca nods. ‘Like my father, and his father, and his father before him
d for my senior year, I was Cephalopod captain.’

A few of the Cephalopods mumble ‘Yesss!’ and pump their fists in t
pride.

‘That same year,’ says Ophelia, ‘I was Orca captain. I also complete
Shark coursework top of the class.’

I look at her with new-found awe. Graduating from two houses is no
tle unheard of, but it is *extremely* difficult. It nearly doubles your workloa
be house captain *and* complete coursework summa cum laude for anot
house … Unbelievable.

ow, On top of that, Sharks and Orcas are generally considered diametric
f his opposites. Sharks are frontline fighters, tacticians, weapons specialists,
ngutan commanders. Orcas are medics, community builders, archivists and su
personnel. I can’t even wrap my mind around how someone could be g
the both.

Gem's forgotten bread hovers over his plate, dripping subaquatic sir
marinara sauce. 'So … wow. Dr – I mean, Ophelia – you had Tarun D
as your Shark captain?'

'Indeed I did. And Sita was my best friend. I taught her everything s
knew about terrorizing our younger classmates.'

'You also terrorized me,' Luca says with a grin. 'The way you stole
heart!'

'And I've been putting up with you ever since.' Ophelia keeps a stra
face, but she gives her husband a quick wink.

Luca laughs. 'That much is true. By the way, Ana, your mother was
brilliant Dolphin captain. She would be very proud of you.'

This isn't the first time I've heard someone talk about knowing my
But it's strange to think of Luca and Ophelia and my parents as teenag
swaggering around Harding-Pencroft together during their senior year
they owned the place, just like Dev does today … Or like he did before
attack …

I try to murmur *Thank you*. It comes out more like 'Unk.'

I set down my fork, hoping nobody notices my trembling fingers.

Of course Nelinha does. 'SO, LUCA …' She draws his attention wi
volume level worthy of Ester. '*How* many generations was your family
HP?'

His eyes gleam. 'Since the beginning. We were recruited because of
ancestor's work on internal combustion.'

Nelinha's expression of interest dials up a few notches. 'Wait, your
ancestor was Eugenio Barsanti? The guy who created the first internal-
combustion engine?'

Luca spreads his hands. 'Many famous families have been associate
HP for generations. The school needed the best minds to replicate Nem
technology! But surely this is no surprise. Your class has a Harding, a
…' He glances at Gem. 'Your surname is Twain, isn't it? Wasn't there
famous American author –?'

'No relation,' Gem mutters. 'Anyway, that guy's real name was Cle

'I see.' Luca sounds vaguely disappointed, like he had wanted an
autograph. 'At any rate, each generation must prove its own worth at H
I'm sure you will!'

Around the table, my classmates' expressions turn glum. I imagine t
thinking the same thing I am. How can we prove our worth if HP no lo

nulated exists?

akkar Maybe we would have made house captains some day. Maybe we w
have found love among our peers, the way Luca and Ophelia did (thou
he frankly, I have a hard time imagining that). Maybe we would've had b
careers.

my There's no way to know. Four days ago, our futures were blasted of
side of a cliff.

ight Ophelia picks up on the change of mood. She sighs in exasperation.
Barsanti.'

a Luca looks confused. 'What did I do?'

I get the feeling Luca is the type of guy who would cheerfully skip t
parents. a minefield and somehow come out unharmed on the other side, while
ers – Ophelia would tear her hair out and chide him for being careless. I hav
like trouble imagining them being friends with my parents. They are just th
e the combination of caring, adventurous, brilliant and eccentric.

'If we're done eating,' Ophelia continues, 'perhaps our guests can h
clean up. Jupiter does the cooking, but he does not do dishes.'

She puts us to work. Nothing like scrubbing lasagne pans to put you
th a problems in perspective. After the kitchen and dining area are spotless
y at of the crew heads back to the *Varuna* for the night. The ship has been
and resupplied, so my classmates will be comfortable enough. Besides
my base doesn't have enough beds for everyone. I'd prefer to go back wit
but Luca and Ophelia have asked me to stay in the base's guest room.
two sets of bunk beds: enough space for Nelinha, Ester and me. Nelinh
brings my go bag ashore along with her own.

Gem looks torn, like he wants to take the fourth bunk so he can guar

d with Yeah … That's not going to happen.

no's 'I'll be fine,' I tell him. 'Take care of the crew on the *Varuna*, okay?
Dakkar see you for breakfast.'

a He hesitates. 'Just be careful.'

I'm not sure if he doesn't trust our hosts, or just doesn't trust life in
mens.' general. After our recent experiences, I can't blame him either way.

Ophelia shows us to our room: a simple stone chamber with the bun
IP, as and not much else. I try not to dwell on how much it looks like a holdi
For the first time since leaving HP, I sleep in a room that doesn't rock
hey're sway.

nger This only makes my nightmares worse.

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CHAPTER THIRTY

I dream of drowning, which isn't like me.

I'm trapped with Dev in the Harding-Pencroft security office, deep b the administration building. On multiple monitors, we watch torpedoes towards the base of the cliffs. Dev yells into the PA system, '*Major thr Need everyone to EVACUATE. I –*'

The room crumbles around us. The floor breaks like a sheet of ice. Monitors and control panels explode. The ceiling collapses. We tumbl oblivion.

We sink beneath the bay, trapped in an air pocket amid a shifting tor wreckage. We scream and beat our fists against slabs of broken concre water pours in. Dev reaches out to take my hand as my head goes unde lungs fill with brine and sediment.

I wake in a cold sweat.

For a few shaky breaths, I don't know where I am.

I hear Ester's *puff-puff-snore* from the next bed over. In the bunk ab me, Nelinha grumbles in her sleep. Maybe I'm back at Harding-Pencro everything is fine …

Then I remember. Lincoln Base. My old life is gone. There's a reaso dreaming about wreckages …

I sit up, shivering. At least my period cramps have started to subside That's a major blessing.

I check my dive watch: 5:30 a.m.

I know I'll never be able to get back to sleep. I slip out of bed as qui I can and grab a swimsuit from my bag. When you dream of drowning

there's only one thing to do: get in the water as soon as possible.

I encounter no one as I retrace my way through the main room and c the pier. The *Varuna* rests dark and silent at her moorings.

As dawn breaks, the lagoon turns to turquoise-and-pink glass. I plun the warm clear water. Immediately, I'm surrounded by a tornado of an I free dive through the reefs. I wave good morning (from a safe distanc viper moray who's peeking out from his crevice. I admire a fourteen-fo nurse shark cruising through the sea grass.

After a while, Socrates finds me. He introduces me to his local dolp friends. We swim together until the sky is full of light.

By the time I pad back into the base, I'm feeling refreshed. The sme baking pastries raises my spirits even more. Jupiter waddles around the dining table, setting out baskets of croissants, muffins and Danish past anticipation of the morning rush. I can't believe one orangutan baked s much in such a short amount of time.

That smells amazing, I tell him. *Can I help?*

He hands me a turnover. *Taste this.*

It melts in my mouth: butter that is not butter, perfect flaky crust tha nothing like seaweed, fruit filling that reminds me of pears and orange probably from one of Nemo's botany projects harvested fifty feet belo

If I lived here all the time, my cholesterol levels would go through t … Or did Nemo figure out a way around cholesterol, too?

Delicious, I say. *Mary Berry would be proud.*

Jupiter calmly signs, *I love you.* Then he waddles back to the kitche a basket of pastries to take to my room – just for my friends, of course make a mental note to ask Jupiter if he can bake gujiyas. If not, I'll hav teach him. Surely Mary Berry would approve.

I find Ester and Nelinha showered and dressed. They don't seem wo about where I've been. They're used to my morning dives.

'Orangutan pastries?' I offer.

'Yes, please.' Nelinha takes a turnover. She looks me up and down. glad you didn't get zapped by any underwater defences in the lagoon.'

Her comment makes me feel dumb, because I didn't even think of t

Ester picks at the crust of a faux-apple tart. She's wearing her pink t and pink leggings today. I assume that means she's especially nervous pink is her comfort colour. Her hair, combed back in wet blond coils, i

already drying and puffing out in different directions. Like Ester's thou
process, her hair always ends up doing what it wants.

'I was thinking last night.' She stares at my feet. 'You remember ho
said the *Nautilus* is dangerous? How I think it killed your parents?'

I nod.

It's not like I could forget.

'I think I understand now,' she says. 'After listening to Luca and Op
talk last night, I don't think you should –'

Someone knocks on our door.

Ophelia pokes her head inside. 'Ah, good. You're all up.'

Her tone makes me suspect that she already knew this. There must b
security monitors throughout the base, maybe even in this room.

Ester blushes and looks down. Top sits in front of her protectively, s
up at Ophelia as if to say, *My human.*

'Ready?' Ophelia asks me. 'Are your friends coming?'

It takes my brain a moment to catch up. Of course. She means am I
to see the *Nautilus*. Jupiter's turnover does a turnover in my stomach.

'Yes,' Nelinha answers for me. 'We're coming.'

'I'd like them to.' I look at Ester. 'If that's okay.'

Ester nods. Her ears turn the colour of flame angelfish.

Behind her steel-framed glasses, Ophelia's eyes look sad. I wonder
remembering my parents. 'Very well,' she says. 'This way.'

Top trots along beside us. He's the only one who doesn't look nervo
Ophelia leads us down a corridor that is perfectly round, like it was bo
into the heart of the volcano by a single massive drill bit.

'Is Luca coming?' I ask.

'He's already there,' Ophelia says.

I'm tempted to ask where exactly *there* is, but I have a feeling I'll fi
soon enough. I wonder if I should have waited for Gem to come with u
imagine he'll give me a hard time about that later. Somehow, though, I
sure a hyper-protective, heavily armed bodyguard would make me any
this morning.

At the far end of the corridor stands a metal hatch that reminds me o
old bank-vault door.

'Was – was this here before?' I ask. 'I mean, in Nemo's time?'

Ophelia looks at me curiously. 'What makes you ask?'

ıght I have to think about this. The door's plating and gear work don't sh
any signs of wear or corrosion. The style is similar to other alt-tech de
w I I've seen, like the LOCUS and the Leyden cannon. But the vault door
to radiate weight and power.

'It seems old,' I decide. 'Like, *really* old.'

Ophelia gives me a dry smile. 'Very astute, Ana. From this point fo
ɔhelia we will be entering Nemo's original base. This door was sealed by Cy
Harding shortly after Nemo's death. It remained shut until we excavate
two years ago, when your father opened it.'

Ester hugs her shivering arms. 'But the volcanic eruption destroyed
ɔe island. It said that in *The Mysterious Island*.'

'Yes, well …' Ophelia peers over the top of her glasses. 'Harding a
ɜtaring Pencroft may have stretched the truth a bit when they spoke to Jules V
Adventurers and treasure hunters were less likely to search for the isla
they believed it had been obliterated.'

ready 'So the book lied.' Ester sounds offended, as if her meticulous note
'Uh …' have betrayed her. 'That explains …'

She stops herself. In the dim overhead light of the corridor, her skin
like stressed coral, slowly losing its healthy pink.

'What *is* that metal?' Nelinha asks our host. 'It isn't steel or brass. It
if she's doesn't seem to corrode.'

'Ingenious, isn't it?' Ophelia agrees. 'For lack of a better term, we c
ɔus. nemonium. We still have not managed to re-create the alloy, though w
red work with it and repurpose old pieces for our own alt-tech. As far as w
tell …'

She launches into a detailed analysis of nemonium's tensile strength
malleability and density that I'm sure several people in the world coul
nd out understand, one of them being Nelinha. Meanwhile, I turn to Ester and
ıs. I whisper, 'You okay?'

[']m not She chews her thumb. I resist the urge to pull her hand away from h
safer mouth.

'Just be careful inside,' she says. 'I think it would help if you talk to
ɔf an first.'

I'm not sure I understand her. One of the problems with being multi
is that sometimes you second-guess yourself about the meanings of wo
Did Ester say *talk to it*? Isn't *it* a neutral pronoun in English? Isn't that
language we're speaking?

I start to say, ‘Talk to –?’

‘Ana,’ Ophelia interrupts. ‘Would you do the honours?’

She gestures to the vault door. It has a massive round gear plate in tl middle, with pistons radiating outwards like the spokes of a ship’s whe the centre of the gear plate, where the wheel’s spindle hole would be, i hemisphere of nemonium, the same size as the DNA-reader I used on l Hewett’s nautical map.

‘Me?’ I ask, as if she might be talking to some other Ana.

‘Well, I *could* do it.’ From her pocket, Ophelia fishes what looks lik metal security card. ‘We were able to jury-rig the lock after your fathe opened it. But since it’s already keyed to your DNA …’

She waits. I don’t know if she’s testing me or letting me test myself. about the unpleasantly warm electrical current that went up my arm th time I touched a Nemo DNA-reader. Then I think about my dream of drowning – the hopeless feeling of terror as Dev reached out for me an seawater filled my lungs. I am the last Dakkar.

I press my hand against the spindle-wheel lock. The metal doesn’t sl me. The central plate rotates. Pistons retract. Air hisses around the edg the door like I’ve broken a vacuum seal. The door itself doesn’t move, suspect that if I pushed it now, it would swing open easily.

Ophelia raises her hand in caution. ‘Before we proceed … Please re calm when we get inside. It’s best to avoid sudden movements and lou noises. Especially you, Ana. Approaching the *Nautilus* should be quite Luca and I are in and out of this cavern on a daily basis, and we’ve hac mishaps.’

Mishaps. The term seems like quite an egregious understatement, considering my parents died because of the *Nautilus*.

‘But you’re still worried,’ I note. ‘Because I’m the first Dakkar to ap the sub since … since the accident.’

Ophelia’s barbed-wire braids glisten in the dim light. ‘We’ve been v for two years to clean and repair the submarine’s systems as best we c

‘Hold on,’ Nelinha says. ‘You’ve been *on board*? It’s still got syste to *clean*?’

‘It’s easiest to show you,’ Ophelia says. ‘Most of the sub’s higher functions are dormant because … well, operating them requires a livin Dakkar. What happened with Tarun and Sita was most likely a malfun misunderstanding. Still, we can’t be sure –’

‘A *misunderstanding*?’ I don’t mean to shout, but she’s talking abou parents’ deaths. I don’t feel like remaining calm.

Ophelia grimaces. She faces Ester.

‘Would you like to explain, my dear?’ Ophelia says. ‘I can tell you’ figured it out.’

Ester picks at her blouse. ‘Ana, like I said, your parents’ death wasn accident. The submarine killed them. I’m so sorry.’

My legs turn wobbly. ‘You make it sound like it was on purpose.’

‘It must have been angry,’ Ester says. ‘It had been sitting at the bott the ocean for a hundred and fifty years. Nemo abandoned it.’

‘Nemo died inside it,’ Ophelia says grimly.

‘Even worse,’ Ester says. ‘It didn’t have anyone to maintain its syste

‘Angry?’ I still refuse to understand. ‘Abandoned? How can a sub fe

Dread washes over me. Some things I just do not *want* to realize, ev when all the evidence is right there in front of me. ‘No,’ I say. ‘You ca serious.’

‘Yes, my dear,’ Ophelia says. ‘Nemo created a prototype of what we would call AI, artificial intelligence. The *Nautilus* is alive.’

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CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

My whole life has led to this moment.

My parents sacrificed everything. I lost my school and my brother. M classmates risked their lives to cross the Pacific Ocean. Generations of Dakkars, Hardings and other HP graduates have lifted me onto their shoulders, living and dying in the expectation that someday a descenda Nemo might once again board his submarine.

And all I want to do is run away.

When you dive, you learn to equalize pressure in your ear canals by pinching your nose and gently puffing air into your sinuses. The deepe go, the more you need to do it. Otherwise your head starts to feel like a soda in the freezer. (Hint: never put a can of soda in the freezer.)

I wish there was a way to equalize my brain emotionally. I keep gett deeper and deeper. The pressure keeps getting worse. I can't just pinch nose and adapt to each new level of misery.

First, I believed my parents died in an accident. Then I was told they recovering a priceless scientific artefact. Now I'm informed that this a is a living thing, and it killed my parents – maybe on purpose, maybe n Gee, we really don't know.

Oh, and, by the way, it's right through this door. Would I like to me

I'm not fully aware when I cross the bank-vault threshold. My mind busy see-sawing between rage and terror. I hear Ophelia saying, 'Com

Nelinha takes me by the elbow. 'I got you, babe. Let's go.'

Then we are inside the dormant central vent of the volcano. Sheer st walls soar upward, forming a cone-shaped cathedral of glistening blacl

I feel like I'm standing inside a gigantic hollowed-out chocolate drop. is no floor – just a pier jutting into a wide circular lake.

Above us, dozens of dragonfly drones buzz through the air, their me wings flickering in the glow of their jewelled eyes. Are they there for surveillance, or to provide light? Maybe this is just where the robo-bug out when they aren't piloting boats into the atoll or escorting lost fresh through the base.

The lake is illuminated, too, from below. Clouds of what look like phytoplankton shimmer in the depths. I've seen bioluminescent bloom before, but they are usually blue. These tiny creatures, whatever they a form thousands of constellations of orange, green, red and yellow, as i lake's entire biome has decided to hold a Holi festival. I wonder if my saw this, and if they had the same thought. Did they die surrounded by bewildering nebulae?

Next to me, Ester makes small whimpering noises. Top goes on high sitting in front of Ester and giving her a quick yip that says, *Hey, it's fi Cute dog right here.* Nelinha whistles under her breath. 'Vixe Maria.'

I force my eyes to follow her gaze along the length of the pier to the moored at the far end.

The *Nautilus* is like nothing I've ever seen. It's difficult for me to ev think of it as a submarine.

Granted, I've never been on an actual sub. That training doesn't star until the second half of our sophomore year. But I *have* seen and studie submarines. Most modern ones look like sleek black tubes with barely surface profile – just the gentle curve of their topside and a single conn tower or 'sail'. The largest ones in the US Navy can be over six hundre from nose to rudder, about the length of two football fields.

The *Nautilus* is about half that size, though that still makes it a big s appears to be tube-shaped – I remember Jules Verne described it as a g cigar – but it is neither black nor low profile. Its hull is made from interlocking panels of nemonium, glistening like abalone shell. Intricat run along its sides, interspersed with bristly clusters of filaments and r indentations that remind me of the vibrissal crypts on Socrates's skin – electroreceptors that allow him to sense his environment.

I can't imagine how a hull so complicated and delicate-looking coul survived intact since the 1800s. It looks like the skin of a sea creature - something between a lionfish and a dolphin.

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Even more unsettling are the *Nautilus*'s eyes. I can't think of what e call them. Set in the ship's bow are two transparent convex ovals lattic with metal girders, like the compound eyes of an insect.

My mind rebels at this design flaw. Windows on a sub? Especially b domed windows? The hydrodynamic drag would make navigation slug The ship's profile would make it easy to spot on sonar. Worst of all, as as the sub reached any kind of depth, those windows would implode, flooding the interior and killing everyone inside. And if you went into against modern ships with explosive weapons? Forget it. You might as go to war inside a big glass bottle.

'This should not exist,' I say. 'It definitely shouldn't be seaworthy.'

Ophelia shrugs. 'And yet …'

And yet here it is: a high-tech, century-and-a-half-old work of nauti docked in the middle of a volcano. I remember one of the creepier pass from *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*, where survivors of the *Nautilus*'s attacks reported seeing giant glowing eyes under the water – the eyes o monster.

I have to admit, if I were a sailor on a three-masted, wooden-hulled merchant ship and I saw this crazy vessel barrelling towards me under at ramming speed, I would've wet my nineteenth-century knickers.

'But it's in perfect condition,' Nelinha says. 'You repaired it in just years, just you and Luca?'

Ophelia snorts. 'Hardly. The exterior needed a lot of cleaning and m minor repairs, but the hull is self-maintaining. When Nemo died, the su at the bottom of this lake, buried in silt, and went into a state of estivat

'Like an African lungfish,' Ester says. Suddenly she is back in famil territory. 'They can stay underground in suspended animation for years

Ophelia looks pleased. 'Exactly so, Ester. The *Nautilus* went into se preservation mode. It was mostly dormant, using electrical currents an circulation around the hull to maintain its integrity. But that doesn't m there wasn't damage. There were leaks. The inside of the ship wasn't flooded, but …' She puts her hand in front of her nose, as if remember smell.

I sway back and forth, though I don't think the boards are moving u my feet. My gaze wanders across the pier. The opposite side of the doc lined with workstations and supply sheds that remind me, weirdly, of t shops on the Santa Monica Pier. I feel a hysterical giggle building in m

chest. I wonder if we can get an ice-cream cone or some candyfloss be
we go aboard the *Nautilus*.

'And Luca is … already on board?' I ask.

Ophelia nods. 'He starts work every day at four a.m. He would sleep
Nautilus if I let him.' She studies me with concern. I imagine I look pr
shell-shocked. 'We do not have to board the ship today, Ana. Seeing it
distance may be enough for your first visit.'

Nelinha faces me like, *Yeah, that would be totally fine. Also, please,
please, please can we go aboard?*

I don't want to get any closer to the submarine that killed my parent
can Luca tolerate being inside it, alone, at four in the morning? I'd rath
sleep in a haunted house with an axe murderer.

But, at the same time, knowing Luca is on board gives me courage.
makes me feel a little ridiculous. If he can do it, why can't I?

'How did it kill my parents?' I ask. My mouth feels full of sand. 'W
happened, exactly?'

Ophelia exhales through her nostrils. 'We successfully raised the shi
moored it just where you see it now, though at the time it looked more
island of mud. Your father wanted to open the main hatch immediately
was … perhaps incautious. The door began to open for him. He pushed
way inside. He was just over the threshold when …'

Ophelia's voice falters. I realize I am asking her to relive one of her
traumatic moments. But I need to know.

'When what?' I ask.

'There was an electrical charge,' she says. 'He died instantly, Ana. I
he even knew what hit him. Your mother, however …' Ophelia's gaze
matches her steely eyewear. 'She rushed in to try to help him. She grab
him while …'

Oh, god. My poor mother. Despite all her training, *of course* her inst
would have been to grab my father and pull him out of danger. The ele
would have coursed through her body, too … maybe not killing her ins
but causing massive internal damage.

'We could not save her,' Ophelia says. The weariness in her voice te
that she tried everything, with all of her Orca training, and that my mo
death was neither instant nor peaceful.

'I am so sorry, dear,' Ophelia says. 'Her last wish …'

fore ‘Cremation,’ I guess. The black pearl at my neck feels warm. I reme
comment Luca made the night before. ‘The underwater gardens of Ner
You scattered their ashes there?’

› on the Ophelia lowers her head. ‘I wish we could have given you and Dev
etty closure. The circumstances … were complicated.’ She points to the bla
from a pearl necklace. ‘Sita left that on board our research boat. She never div
with it. That’s why it survived, why we could send it to you.’

I expect my anger to become a tsunami. I imagine myself raging acr
this pier, throwing things at Ophelia and the submarine, screaming at t
s. How entire world.

ıer Somehow that doesn’t happen. I look at the *Nautilus*. I feel smoulde
resentment, even hatred, but I also feel more certain than ever that this
It submarine and I are connected by fate. I have to make my parents’ sac
mean something.

hat ‘All right,’ I say. ‘Where’s the entrance?’

It isn’t obvious.

ip. We There is no conn tower, no visible hatch, no rails. There isn’t even a
like an gangplank.

. He Ophelia leads us to the middle of the ship. Ester takes my hand, whi
l his completely unlike her. Her palm is warm and moist. I’m not sure who
comforting whom, but I’m glad to have her with me. It occurs to me th
most is the first time a Harding and a Dakkar have been in this cavern togetl
since the day Captain Nemo died.

After a moment, narrow slits like gills open in the side of the ship. M
doubt tendrils unfold, weaving themselves into a stairway. At the top of the r
circular section of the hull irises open.

›bed My ears roar. It takes me a moment to realize Ophelia has just asked
question.

tinct ‘What?’ I ask.

ctricity ‘Would you like me to go first?’ she says again. ‘It might be safer if
stantly, ‘No, I’ll do it,’ I say.

Nelinha shifts uncomfortably. ‘Ana, you sure?’

ells me I step to the edge of the stairwell.

ther’s Every nerve in my body is telling me to run. I’m so awash with emo
could drown just fine without water. But I think I know what went wrc
my parents. I think I know what to do.

My father was a Shark. Ophelia is an Orca and a Shark. Luca is a Cephalopod. All of them would have seen the *Nautilus* as a prize to be opened and explored. My mother, Sita, was the only Dolphin in the gr doubt she had time to think or act like one when they raised the *Nautil* father was too impulsive. He rushed in and died. My mother died tryin save him.

'Hello, *Nautilus*.' I speak in Bundeli.

That was Nemo's native tongue. He would have grown up speaking along with English, back when India was under British subjugation. If spoke any language to his creation, I'm guessing he would have chose language he dreamed in.

'I am Ana Dakkar.' I try not to feel self-conscious about addressing open hatchway. I have talked to dolphins, dogs, orangutans and even s from Land Institute. Talking to an antique submarine shouldn't be any

'I know you lashed out when my father woke you up.' I worry that t *Nautilus* will hear the rage in my voice, but I decide I have to be hones killed my parents. I don't think I can ever forgive that. But I understan were probably confused, scared and angry.'

The submarine does not respond. Obviously.

'My ancestor,' I continue, 'the one who called himself Nemo, he lef alone for a very long time. I am sorry for that. The thing is … I'm the l the Dakkars. I'm alone and unique, just like you. We're kind of each o last chance. I'd like your permission to come aboard. I promise I'll do best to respect you and listen to you, if you'll do the same for me. And could refrain from killing me that would be great.'

There is no way to tell whether the sub has heard me or understood.

Does it have little coppery ears somewhere on that hull? Does its art intelligence even recognize voices?

Only one way to find out.

I step onto the ramp.

I am not immediately electrocuted. I decide this is a good sign.

'Thank you,' I tell the *Nautilus*. 'I am coming aboard.'

And I step over the last threshold my parents ever crossed.

My father was a Shark. Ophelia is an Orca and a Shark. Luca is a Cephalopod. All of them would have seen the *Nautilus* as a prize to be opened and explored. My mother, Sita, was the only Dolphin in the group. I doubt she had time to think or act like one when they raised the *Nautilus*. My father was too impulsive. He rushed in and died. My mother died trying to save him.

'Hello, *Nautilus*.' I speak in Bundeli.

That was Nemo's native tongue. He would have grown up speaking it, along with English, back when India was under British subjugation. If Nemo spoke any language to his creation, I'm guessing he would have chosen the language he dreamed in.

'I am Ana Dakkar.' I try not to feel self-conscious about addressing an open hatchway. I have talked to dolphins, dogs, orangutans and even students from Land Institute. Talking to an antique submarine shouldn't be any sillier.

'I know you lashed out when my father woke you up.' I worry that the *Nautilus* will hear the rage in my voice, but I decide I have to be honest. 'You killed my parents. I don't think I can ever forgive that. But I understand you were probably confused, scared and angry.'

The submarine does not respond. Obviously.

'My ancestor,' I continue, 'the one who called himself Nemo, he left you alone for a very long time. I am sorry for that. The thing is … I'm the last of the Dakkars. I'm alone and unique, just like you. We're kind of each other's last chance. I'd like your permission to come aboard. I promise I'll do my best to respect you and listen to you, if you'll do the same for me. And if you could refrain from killing me that would be great.'

There is no way to tell whether the sub has heard me or understood.

Does it have little coppery ears somewhere on that hull? Does its artificial intelligence even recognize voices?

Only one way to find out.

I step onto the ramp.

I am not immediately electrocuted. I decide this is a good sign.

'Thank you,' I tell the *Nautilus*. 'I am coming aboard.'

And I step over the last threshold my parents ever crossed.



CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Two things I do not associate with submarines: elegance and air freshe

From the main hatch, a circular stairwell descends into a grand foye looks more like part of a cruise ship than a working sub. I half expect a steward in a white uniform to offer me a tropical beverage.

The black walls gleam like polished ebony, bordered with golden nemonium beams. On the other side of the room, a second spiral stairc leads down to a lower level. In the centre of the marble floor (at least i like marble) is a mosaic crest: a large golden cursive *N* in a circle of bl wreathed by golden squid. Underneath is the motto MOBILIS IN MOBILE.

Latin. Difficult to translate. Something like *moving through the mov* or *movement in motion*, neither of which makes much sense.

Seeing that motto in person gives me a punch in the gut. I remembe reading it in *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* the summer before eighth just after my parents left home for the last time … before I got the new was an orphan. My life was moving through the moveable, and I didn' know it.

Now I'm standing in the actual *Nautilus*. Cyrus Harding and Bonave Pencroft passed through this room. So did Ned Land and Pierre Aronn just as characters in Jules Verne's novels, but as *real people*.

My head spins. The smell from the air fresheners doesn't help. They the cheap kind you might buy at a car wash – cardboard cutouts shape Christmas trees. Some dangle from the stair railing. Others are taped to nemonium wall beams. The cloying fragrances of pine and vanilla wag war for dominance in my nostrils.

Behind those scents, I catch a whiff of mould and decay. Luca and C have tried their best, but the *Nautilus* still smells like a mixture betwee rotted-out fishing wharf and somebody's great-aunt's house. It's going a number on Robbie Barr's allergies.

Top seems to think the foyer smells marvellous. He sniffs the air lik balancing a ball on his nose. Nelinha studies the walls without touchin her eyes tracing the path of the air ducts. Ester stands in the middle of coat of arms and turns in a full circle. Then she turns in reverse, as if unwinding herself.

'This ship is angry,' she decides. 'It feels angry to you, doesn't it?'

I'm not sure how to answer. My senses are overloaded. I do feel a heaviness in the air, like just before a thunderstorm. I may have bough temporary truce with the *Nautilus*, but I suspect it is watching me, wai my next move. We are not friends yet. Not by a long shot.

'It's beautiful,' I say. 'Scary. Overwhelming.'

'And angry,' Ester insists. 'Please be careful, Ana.'

Ophelia is the last one down the stairs. The hatch rises shut behind h

'So far, so good.' She gives me an encouraging smile, but she looks Every muscle in her body seems coiled for action. I imagine if a firecr went off behind her, she'd jump so high we'd have to prise her off the ceiling. 'Let's find my husband.'

That, at least, shouldn't be hard.

From the aft region of the ship, I hear the distant echo of someone whistling, punctuated by the whir of a power drill.

'Luca!' Ophelia's shout almost makes *me* jump to the ceiling.

His voice reverberates back as if from the bottom of a well. 'Yes, m cuore! Engine room! It is quite safe!'

Ophelia raises an eyebrow at us. 'So he says. I hope he's right this ti

Nelinha frowns. 'I thought you said there hadn't been any more, wh you call them, mishaps.'

'No serious ones, no,' Ophelia says. 'But the *Nautilus* can be … gru This way.'

Oh, hooray. Deeper into a grumpy submarine.

Ophelia leads us aft, down a central corridor.

Paintings in gilded frames hang along the walls. At least I assume th *used* to be paintings. Now they are canvases of black mould. The tile f marked with smudge lines where it looks like someone pulled up a rott

Ophelia carpet. Along the ceiling, bronze oval light fixtures flicker a dim Hallo
n a orange.
; to do As we pass open doorways, it's difficult not to stop and gawk.

To port: a formal dining room with a mahogany table and eight mat
e he's high-backed chairs. China and silverware gleam in the sideboard cabin
g them, Under the table lies a tattered and mouldy oriental rug.
the To starboard: a library with floor-to-ceiling bookshelves. It hurts my
to see so many mildewed books, swollen and ruined from water damag
Two cracked leather armchairs sit on either side of a wood-burning fir
(Seriously? Where does the smoke go?) Against the far wall, a long ov
window provides an underwater view of the phytoplankton constellatic
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Nemo brought on board for furnishing and decoration, however, has n
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flowers and fine clothing that are slowly rotting away until only the st
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tense. We pass what must have been the crew's quarters. Instead of tiny cc
ıcker size berths stacked one on top of another like I'd expect in a modern su
there are four full-size bunk beds in each room – much more space per
than what we have on the *Varuna*. For a submarine, this is pure decade

Nelinha points to one of the bunks. 'I'm sleeping there.'

Ophelia snorts. 'You're as bad as Luca.'

'I heard that!' Luca appears, grinning, at the far end of the corridor.
wears greasy overalls and holds a pipe wrench in his hand. 'Ana, perfe
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carpet. Along the ceiling, bronze oval light fixtures flicker a dim Halloween orange.

As we pass open doorways, it's difficult not to stop and gawk.

To port: a formal dining room with a mahogany table and eight matching high-backed chairs. China and silverware gleam in the sideboard cabinet. Under the table lies a tattered and mouldy oriental rug.

To starboard: a library with floor-to-ceiling bookshelves. It hurts my heart to see so many mildewed books, swollen and ruined from water damage. Two cracked leather armchairs sit on either side of a wood-burning fireplace. (Seriously? Where does the smoke go?) Against the far wall, a long oval window provides an underwater view of the phytoplankton constellations outside.

It strikes me that the 'bones' of the ship are pretty much intact. Everything Nemo brought on board for furnishing and decoration, however, has not fared so well. The submarine reminds me of an ancient statue, adorned with paint, flowers and fine clothing that are slowly rotting away until only the stone will remain.

We pass what must have been the crew's quarters. Instead of tiny coffin-size berths stacked one on top of another like I'd expect in a modern sub, there are four full-size bunk beds in each room – much more space per person than what we have on the *Varuna*. For a submarine, this is pure decadence.

Nelinha points to one of the bunks. 'I'm sleeping there.'

Ophelia snorts. 'You're as bad as Luca.'

'I heard that!' Luca appears, grinning, at the far end of the corridor. He wears greasy overalls and holds a pipe wrench in his hand. 'Ana, perfect timing! Perhaps you can help me convince the *Nautilus* not to be quite such a prima donna this morning, eh? There is a secret door I have been dying to open!'



CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Considering my family's history with this ship, I wish Luca hadn't use phrase *dying to open*.

Then again, I've spent enough time with Nelinha to know that Cephalopods get tunnel vision when they're working on things that int them. And nothing could be more intriguing than the *Nautilus*.

Luca leads us down another stairwell into what I assume is engineer Aboard most subs, the engine room would be a hot, cramped space wit equipment than air. No surprise: the *Nautilus* is a different story.

The chamber is panelled floor-to-ceiling in reflective nemonium, wh makes it look even bigger than it is. Endlessly mirrored Anas stare bac from the gleaming metal. I have a vague memory of a scene like this in *Wonka and the Chocolate Factory* (my father loved that movie a bit to much). I feel like I should be wearing sunglasses and a hazmat suit and walking along with Grandpa Joe.

Stacked against the port and starboard walls are rows of large cylind first glance, I guess they're torpedo tubes. Then I sense their gentle synchronized thrum. They must be part of the power system – pistons some kind.

In the middle of the room stands an island with four control stations gauges, readouts and levers are so intricately designed they remind me open-faced Swiss watch. A few displays are lit up, their needles quiver Most look dark and dead.

Nelinha squeals as she reads the descriptions on various brass plates afraid she might explode from happiness.

Luca chuckles. ‘I know. I had the same reaction when I first stepped this room.’

‘This one.’ Nelinha points to an ominous-looking red button. ‘*Super Cavitation Drive.* You can’t be serious?’

Ophelia crosses her arms. ‘If only we could get it to work. But, yes, appears Nemo succeeded.’

‘Super-cavitation …?’ I know I’ve heard that term in Dr Hewett’s cl start to hum ‘Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious’ in my head, but I’m pr sure that’s a different concept. I probably would have paid closer atten Hewett had said, *By the way, this technology is real, and your life may depend on it.*

‘Cav-drive is next-level propulsion,’ Nelinha explains. ‘The world’s navies are researching it now, but no one has got it to work yet. You cr sheath of air around the nose of the sub, so you have zero water resista Then BANG. You hit the engines and … well, in theory, you could sh across the ocean at any depth at extreme velocity, more like a bullet th boat.’

Ester shivers. ‘That explains how Nemo covered so much distance i books. He kept popping up all around the globe. They could never cat Don’t you guys feel cold?’

It feels really warm to me. Maybe that’s because I’m thinking about much power is coursing through this engine room, and how easy it wo for the *Nautilus* to end its Dakkar problems once and for all with one b

‘Through there –’ Luca gestures to a riveted oval door with a small porthole window at the back of the room – ‘is the cold-fusion reactor. hydrogen directly from the ocean. Eternal combustion power with no v In case that breaks down for some reason …’ He points to an identical on the right. ‘Nelinha, you will not believe this … the backup generato coal-burning.’

Nelinha coughs. ‘What?’

‘That’s right!’ Luca laughs with delight. ‘Nemo skipped a century o science. He leap-frogged from steam engines to cold fusion! I’ve thou about replacing the coal-burner with something less Victorian, but –’

A creaking groan echoes through the ship.

Top barks.

I turn to Ophelia with what may or may not be an expression of shee terror. ‘Was that …?’

‘The *Nautilus* acting grumpy,’ she confirms.

‘She doesn’t like talk about modifications.’ Ester studies the ceiling she’s discovered hidden zodiac signs.

It’s customary to call any ship *she*, but I get the feeling Ester has pic on something more fundamental about the *Nautilus*. I decide I’ll keep my side whenever I’m on board, and I’ll take her warnings seriously.

‘What *does* the *Nautilus* like?’ I ask.

Ester runs her hand across the console. ‘She appreciates being clean fixed up. She likes that.’

‘Ah, you see?’ Luca raises his eyebrows at Ophelia. ‘This is why sh enjoys my company so much.’

‘She tolerates you, anyway,’ Ophelia says. ‘She knows you are usef

‘Now, dear. Don’t be jealous.’

Nelinha continues her inspection of the control panels. She reads alc fancy calligraphy on each engraved bronze label: ‘Vector thrusters. Dy positioning. Recursive ballast control? Oh, this is incredible! *Nautilus*, you!’

The ship does not respond, but I imagine she’s thinking, *Yes, I know rather marvellous.*

I have trouble sharing Nelinha’s enthusiasm. This is still the ship tha killed my parents. I try to control my feelings. I’m doing my best to understand my ancestor’s strange, ancient, apparently living creation. I part of me wants to grab Luca’s pipe wrench and start smashing things

I try to refocus. ‘Luca, you said there was a secret door?’

‘Yes, just here!’ Luca leads me to a hatch that’s tucked in a corner b the giant pistons. It’s not so much a door as a service panel, maybe big enough for a child to squeeze through. There is no visible lock or hand

‘Do you know what’s inside?’ I ask.

Luca hesitates, so Ophelia answers. ‘We’ve found several panels lik throughout the ship,’ she says. ‘We suspect they allow access to the *Nautilus*’s core processor … her brain, if you will. After a century and under the sea, her other systems required quite a lot of cleaning and re We suspect her core does, too, but …’

‘She is reluctant to let someone fool around in her brain,’ Luca says. ‘Understandable, of course. And I will not try to force the panels.’

‘No,’ Ester agrees. ‘That would be bad.’

‘But if we *could* clean out these hatches –’ Luca gives me a meaning
like glance – ‘I suspect it might help all of us, especially the *Nautilus*.’

I get his point. For all we know, the submarine’s higher reasoning co
:ked up severely impaired. That might be why the *Nautilus* lashed out at my pa
Ester at when they woke her up. Fixing the sub’s brain could make her friendli
easier to deal with.

On the other hand, it could make her angrier and more dangerous …

ed and Top sniffs the hatch. He, at least, looks eager to smell a submarine b

‘Ester, any advice?’ I ask.

e ‘Be careful,’ she suggests.

‘That’s very helpful. Thank you.’

ul.’ ‘You’re welcome.’

One of Ester’s many superpowers: she is impervious to sarcasm.

)ud the I place my hand on the hatch. ‘*Nautilus*, we would like to clean insid
/namic here,’ I say in Bundeli. ‘We will be extremely careful not to damage yo
I love Would that be all right?’

The panel clicks.

'. *I* am ‘Wonderful!’ Luca beams. ‘May I?’

I move aside. Luca pulls open the hatch, which unleashes a hideous
at like Davy Jones’s gym locker. Top wags his tail deliriously.

Luca reaches inside. He pulls out a large wad of gunk – algae, seawe
But crustacean poop? I don’t know.

. ‘You see?’ Luca holds up his prize like it’s a golden goose’s egg. Bl
slime coats his arm up to his elbow. ‘It’s a miracle the *Nautilus* still fu
)ehind at all! Oh, Ana, imagine what she’ll be able to do once we get her clea
properly. You are the key to –’

le. *FOOOOOOM!*

The sound shakes the floor and rattles my eye sockets: a deep, reson
e this low E-flat, held for a whole note. Luca drops his goo. Top hides behin
Ester’s legs. Nelinha widens her stance like she’s expecting a tidal wav
a half Ophelia braces herself against the wall.

)air. The noise dies. I wait, but it does not repeat. ‘That sounded like –’

‘The pipe organ,’ Luca says in alarm.

. ‘It’s never done that before,’ Ophelia murmurs.

‘The *what*?’ I ask.

Luca and Ophelia look at each other. They seem to have a silent, an
debate about what to do next.

gful ‘I think,’ Ophelia says at last, ‘it is time to show Ana the bridge.’

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‘I think,’ Ophelia says at last, ‘it is time to show Ana the bridge.’



CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

The first thing you want to install in your high-tech super sub?

A pipe organ, of course.

The wonders of the *Nautilus* have already waged war on my sense o reality. When we reach the bridge, my mind simply runs up the white f and surrenders. A pipe organ – now silent – does, in fact, take up the e starboard side of the room, but that's only one of the bridge's oddities.

The prow's 'eyes' dominate the front of the bridge. The bulging me laced domes provide a wide view of the cavern outside, making me fee I'm in an aquatic conservatory … or maybe a fish tank.

'The windows aren't really glass,' Luca assures me. 'As near as we figure out, the material is a transparent iron polymer created at extreme temperature and pressure.'

'Like at the bottom of the sea,' Nelinha guesses. 'Near a volcanic ve

Luca taps his nose. 'Just so, my dear. Perhaps Nemo forged his hull using a similar process. We're not sure how he would have managed th yet another mystery to unravel. Of course, when Jules Verne wrote his novels, he didn't know what to call that material, so he called it iron.' H plinks a knuckle against the nearest nemonium girder. 'Clearly not iron

Four control stations make a horseshoe curve along the front of the b As in the engine room, each panel is Swiss-watch intricate, with dials a switches labelled in engraved calligraphy. LOCUS nodes, dormant, are mounted on top of each station. Artistic flourishes decorate the borders controls: dolphins, whales and flying fish.

The entire ship is a handcrafted, bespoke work of art. She could nev reproduced, much less mass-produced. I start to appreciate just how ur the *Nautilus* is and why her recovery was so important to HP and to La Institute. Already on this tour, I have seen half a dozen technological advances that could change the world – if the *Nautilus* would let us tak apart and study her inner workings, which I don't think she would agre

'And here,' Luca says, gripping the back of what is clearly the capta chair, 'is where we found Nemo.'

'Aah!' Ophelia swats his arm. 'They did not need to hear that!'

'Well, I thought Ana might want to know he died at his station. We considered trying to extract some of his DNA, but, ah, ethical consider aside, it soon became clear that the *Nautilus* would not tolerate any cle tricks to bypass her systems. She must *choose* her captain, and it must living Dakkar.'

Ophelia pinches her nose. 'Ana, my dear, I am sorry. My husband h sense of propriety.'

I look at the captain's seat. It's a monstrous metal L on a swivel ped like an old-fashioned barber's chair. Nested in each armrest is a hemispherical hand grip, like the DNA-reader on the *Varuna*. The seat upholstery appears to be gleaming black leather.

For some reason, the idea of my fourth great-grandfather's body bei found here doesn't disturb me as much as I might have thought. In a w whole submarine already feels like his crypt, his earthly remains.

I trace my fingers across the supple leather seatback. 'This material new.'

'Yes, indeed,' Luca agrees. 'The metal survived. The original leathe damaged beyond repair. Also, well, the remains of your ancestor had b sitting there for over a century …' He glances at Ophelia to see if she swat him again. 'We committed Nemo to the sea. Then I re-covered th The material itself is seaweed-based. Fortunately I have an excellent leatherworker friend in Firenze. Italian workmanship is the best, as eve knows.'

Ophelia rolls her eyes. 'We have, of course, tried to activate more of ship's systems. But the captain's chair seems to govern access to every critical: propulsion, weapons, navigation, communications.'

She points to each of the four control stations in turn. Then she faces again, as if waiting …

Of course. She'd like me to sit in the chair. She doesn't want to push she's dying to see what will happen if I put my hands on those control spheres. Even for Luca and Ophelia, who have been so kind and welco it's hard for them to see me as a person and not as an all-purpose mirac tool.

I take a deep breath. I don't want to sit in that chair. It isn't mine. I h earned it. I'm trying to figure out the politest way to decline when Este me.

'You shouldn't start there,' she says. She's been quiet so far, standir the middle of the bridge, taking in every detail, maybe listening to the of the ship. 'You should start *there*.'

She points to the pipe organ. I've been trying not to think about the musical contraption and why it suddenly decided to play a single blast itself.

Something about its presence on the bridge creeps me out, even mor than the dead captain's chair. Trying the pipe organ before the bridge c doesn't sound logical. But, then again, Ester seems to understand the s way that goes deeper than logic.

I approach the forest of gleaming metal pipes.

The four-tiered keyboard has seen better days, but it is still beautiful major keys look like abalone. The minor keys have the same dark lustr my mother's black pearl. Like the pipes, the pull-stop levers and pedal gleaming nemonium, etched with decorative fish leaping through wave

The bench's velvet cushion is black with mould. Its wooden legs loc ready to collapse.

Luca coughs. 'I'm afraid I don't know much about pipe organs,' he sheepishly. 'I cleaned it as best I could, but its more delicate pieces are bad shape. I'm sure it needs tuning … however one tunes an organ.'

'I have no idea,' I admit. 'I took piano lessons, but …'

The memory takes me back to elementary school.

I recall Dev complaining bitterly whenever Mrs Flannigan arrived a house for twice-weekly lessons. He hated playing the piano. It wasn't a It wasn't outside. He couldn't kick it, shoot it or tackle it.

Still, our parents insisted.

Your future depends on many skills, I remember my father saying, *including the keyboard.*

I'd never understood that. I just chalked it up as yet another of our p strange and inscrutable commandments. Like so many things that invo Dev, my own piano lessons were an afterthought. Mrs Flannigan was c over anyway. She might as well give us a two-for-one deal.

Dev was always better. Despite his complaints, he had a natural ear. never practised. He just stormed up to the keyboard, listened to Mrs Flannigan play, then imitated her perfectly. His sloppiness and impatie drove her crazy, especially since it didn't stop him from mastering wha she put in front of him.

As for me, I plodded along, carefully and mathematically, treating th keyboard like another language, learning each song like a sentence to b diagrammed.

Now I wonder if my parents knew about Nemo's pipe organ. Verne mentioned it in *20,000 Leagues*, didn't he? Were they preparing Dev f something more specific than just playing a few nice tunes at a dinner

'Did Dev ever come here?' I ask.

Ophelia looks shocked. 'Of course not. It would've been much too r

Luca adds hastily, 'You would not be here, either, my dear, if not fo dire situation.'

I still shouldn't be here, I think. I'm a consolation prize. A last-ditch string quarterback for Harding-Pencroft.

'Dev wanted to see the *Nautilus*, of course,' Luca continues. 'When your age … Well, the staff at HP had a difficult time convincing him t once he was told the truth. He wanted to come here immediately. Then argued that he should come right after his graduation from HP. Eventu listened to reason. He agreed to go to college first, giving us four more to restore the ship and understand how it worked. That would also hav him four more years to learn and mature.'

I try to process this information. I can recall several times over the la years when Dev seemed inexplicably angry. Then again, we'd lost our parents. I wasn't a happy camper, either.

I have no trouble imagining Dev being impatient to see the *Nautilus* idea that he would listen to reason and go quietly off to college, though that's a little harder to picture. Sure, he acted excited about graduating was looking forward to college. But, now that I know about the *Nautil* wonder if Dev was secretly chafing about those extra four years of wai

I wish I could have talked to him about it. Now it's too late.

‘You should play,’ Ester suggests. ‘I think the ship would like that.’

Like another language …

Still standing, I place my fingers on the lowest keyboard. The keys a cold as air-conditioner vents.

It’s been years since I played … since just after my parents died, wh house was sold, and the old piano was rolled away. Do I even rememb songs?

I decide to try Bach’s Fugue in D Minor. That was written for the or used to play it every Halloween, because it was so creepy. Played at a pace, it’s also plaintive and sad, and the composition is so old Nemo m have known it. He might have even played it on this organ.

I peck out the first measure. The notes sound flat, but they resonate through the ship.

Second measure: I miss a beat, hit a D-natural by mistake, but I kee playing. The arpeggio brings me to the first full chord. I let it play out, shaking the floor. I lift my hands. I am trying to recall the next measur

Nelinha says, ‘Ana.’

I turn. Luca and Ophelia are staring in amazement at the lights that l come to life on the bridge. The control panels are all illuminated. Four LOCUS holographic displays float above the control stations like a lin ghostly planets. The great eyes of the prow are lit purple around the bo

The captain’s chair has similar mood lighting around the base.

The *Nautilus*, it seems, likes Bach.

‘Ana Dakkar,’ Luca says in a reverent tone, ‘today is going to be a wonderful day.’

‘You should play,’ Ester suggests. ‘I think the ship would like that.’

Like another language …

Still standing, I place my fingers on the lowest keyboard. The keys are as cold as air-conditioner vents.

It’s been years since I played … since just after my parents died, when our house was sold, and the old piano was rolled away. Do I even remember any songs?

I decide to try Bach’s Fugue in D Minor. That was written for the organ. I used to play it every Halloween, because it was so creepy. Played at a slow pace, it’s also plaintive and sad, and the composition is so old Nemo might have known it. He might have even played it on this organ.

I peck out the first measure. The notes sound flat, but they resonate through the ship.

Second measure: I miss a beat, hit a D-natural by mistake, but I keep playing. The arpeggio brings me to the first full chord. I let it play out, shaking the floor. I lift my hands. I am trying to recall the next measure when Nelinha says, ‘Ana.’

I turn. Luca and Ophelia are staring in amazement at the lights that have come to life on the bridge. The control panels are all illuminated. Four LOCUS holographic displays float above the control stations like a line of ghostly planets. The great eyes of the prow are lit purple around the borders. The captain’s chair has similar mood lighting around the base.

The *Nautilus*, it seems, likes Bach.

‘Ana Dakkar,’ Luca says in a reverent tone, ‘today is going to be a wonderful day.’



CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

When Luca says *wonderful*, he means *so busy you will never sit down*.

The rest of the morning, I lead tours of the *Nautilus* for my classmat taking only a few at a time. Before each visit, I talk to the *Nautilus* to l know what's up. Ester serves as submarine interpreter, warning everyc be considerate of the ship's feelings. I'm not sure what our classmates of this, but they are willing to humour us. Top tags along, sniffing eve

By lunchtime, the entire freshman class has been on board at least o We're all left smelling faintly of mildew and vanilla air freshener. On plus side, no one has been killed by electrical discharges or mould alle consider that a win.

We all gather to eat in the dining room of Lincoln Base, but I'm so frazzled I can barely enjoy Jupiter's excellent macroalgae-cheese souf Most of my classmates seem to be in great spirits, though. They feel sa shielded from the outside world by our HP mentors and lots of alt-tech gadgetry. They've had a few good meals. The *Nautilus* woke up more than anyone anticipated. What's not to feel happy about?

The crew even feels excited about Luca's plans to put us to work aft lunch. Twenty people can clean a lot faster than one or two. If the *Nau* lets us, we will immediately start hauling out the mouldy furniture, un- gooping the internal wiring and ductwork, and scrubbing … well, ever To me, it feels like that scene in *Tom Sawyer* where Tom convinces all friends to pay him for the fun and privilege of painting his fence, but I it'll get the job done.

The news from the sickbay is also encouraging. Though Dr Hewett remains comatose, his condition has stabilized thanks to experimental

medicines Ophelia reverse-engineered from the *Nautilus*'s own laborat

I ask her privately if she has anything for menstrual cramps. Mine h passed for now, but periods are like General Douglas MacArthur in W War II: *They shall return.*

Ophelia sighs. 'If Nemo had been a woman? That would have been *first* thing he invented. But, alas, no. Just general pain-relief medicatio Once the submarine is back to full operations, we will ask her to help u engineer something more specific, yes?'

During lunch, the only person who looks unhappy is Gemini Twain. sits across from me at the dining table, glumly poking his soufflé with

'Okay, there, Spidey?' Nelinha asks him.

Gem frowns. 'You all shouldn't have gone on board the sub without this morning. What if something bad had happened?'

'Well,' Nelinha says, 'I'm sure you would have shot the submarine between the eyes like a true hero! Fortunately, we survived fine withou

Gem stares at the table, as if he's saying a prayer for patience. 'I'm to check on Dr Hewett.'

He stands and marches off.

I put a hand on Nelinha's wrist. 'We don't need to be sniping at one another.'

She looks surprised. 'What *sniping*?'

I sigh, get up and follow Gem.

I find him in the sickbay, leaning against the wall with his arms cros staring at Dr Hewett's unconscious form. Franklin Couch putters arou checking the professor's monitors and fluid levels, but, when he sees t serious expression on my face, he says, 'If you two will watch my pati a sec, I'm going to grab some lunch.'

He beats a hasty retreat.

'I'm sorry, Gem,' I say. 'I should've waited for you this morning. I' sure you're in the loop from now on.'

The frown lines around his eyes soften a bit. 'I'd appreciate that. I d know, Ana … Something doesn't feel right. We shouldn't relax.'

I wish I could brush off his concerns as easily as Nelinha does, but I unsettled, too, as though I've missed an important warning – like the significance of the security grid flickering the morning Harding-Pencr destroyed.

I study Dr Hewett's face … He still looks too pale, his skin almost translucent, but some of the jaundiced yellow seems to have faded arou neck and cheekbones. His hair has been washed and combed so it look almost majestic – like the mane of an ancient lion.

'He was my advisor,' Gem murmurs. 'Also the closest person I ever a father.'

I feel as if we've stepped out onto opposite sides of a quivering tight Gem's voice is full of pain. I never would have considered Dr Hewett surrogate father figure – for Gem, or for Dev – but apparently he'd trie guide them both. Hewett's condition must be worrying Gem much mo he's let on.

I'm not sure how to ask my next question. I'm not sure I should ask all, but Gem seems to be inviting me to take the risk. 'Did you know y dad?'

He exhales – a humourless laugh. 'My mom and dad are alive and w Last I heard, they were living in Oregon.'

My first thought is *Oh, that's not so far from HP*, but the way Gem *Oregon*, he might as well be talking about Saturn.

'They weren't in your life,' I guess.

He unfolds his spindly arms, then clasps his hands behind his back a he's not sure what to do with them. As usual, he's wearing no-nonsens commando black: jeans and T-shirt, even his belt and gun holsters – a cowboy on his way to a funeral.

'Do you know how I got the name Gemini?'

'Because of your twin guns, right? I heard your real name is James - so Gemini …'

He shakes his head. 'I didn't make up that story, but I don't correct when they tell it. My legal name is Gemini Twain. My parents are … modern-day hippies, I guess you'd call them. They're into horoscopes, crystals, tarot cards, all that. What they weren't into was being parents I was little, they left my brother and me with our grandmother in Provo raised us, brought us into the church. My brother is six years older tha When he left for his missionary work in Brazil …'

He watches the blips on Dr Hewett's heart monitor. 'I guess what I' saying is, I don't have many connections. So the ones I *do* have are important. I've apologized to Nelinha several times about embarrassin

that day in the cafeteria. I was just … I was missing my brother, and lo
and his to make new friends. But I get why she hates me.'
s The air in my lungs feels raw, as if I'm breathing from a contaminat
tank. Nelinha is my bestie. When she hurts, I hurt. But it's terrible that
had to never considered Gem's side of the story. And I had no idea he'd apol
to her about the *scholarship kid* incident.
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a just this week. Miracles can happen.'
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re than I need HP. Dr Hewett told me … he believed the school could rise fro
ashes. He gave me the job of protecting you because you're the only o
it at can make that happen.'
our My heart feels as delicate as one of Jupiter's soufflés. 'Gem … I kn
we're in an emergency situation, but just because I'm a Dakkar doesn'
ell. I'm a full-time leader.'
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watched you manage the crew for three days. You organized us, deplo
everyone's talents, kept us from killing one another. You gave us a pu
is if when we were falling apart. That's not about your DNA. That's about
e I'm glad you're in charge.'
I imagine my ears are as bright red as Lee-Ann's, and it's not becau
about to tell a lie. I have trouble taking compliments. I tend to assume
other person is just trying to be nice or sparing my feelings. But Gem i
- Jim – like that. He's a straight shooter. And he's just hit my body centre mas
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m

g her

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Gem shrugs. 'I suppose. It's just … I *need* this team to stay together, Ana. I need HP. Dr Hewett told me … he believed the school could rise from the ashes. He gave me the job of protecting you because you're the only one who can make that happen.'

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He stares at me. 'You're kidding, right? Ana, I was on the bridge of the *Varuna* when you cracked that code. You focused your team, got results. I watched you manage the crew for three days. You organized us, deployed everyone's talents, kept us from killing one another. You gave us a purpose when we were falling apart. That's not about your DNA. That's about *you*. I'm glad you're in charge.'

I imagine my ears are as bright red as Lee-Ann's, and it's not because I'm about to tell a lie. I have trouble taking compliments. I tend to assume the other person is just trying to be nice or sparing my feelings. But Gem isn't like that. He's a straight shooter. And he's just hit my body centre mass with some praise I never expected. 'Well … thank you.'

In the doorway, Franklin coughs. 'Didn't mean to eavesdrop, but Gemini is right. Now, if you'll excuse me, I need to change my patient's catheter, unless you two want to stay and help.'

Franklin knows how to clear a room. I head back to the dining hall with Gem right behind me, and for the first time I'm glad to have him at my shoulder.



CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

That afternoon, we take the entire crew aboard the *Nautilus* for the firs

I'm worried about the submarine's reaction. The sounds of power to vacuums and kids yelling back and forth is probably the most noise thi has heard since before Queen Victoria was crowned Empress of India. Sharks form a bucket brigade to remove goop, along with ruined furnit and mouldy artwork. After a few hours, the pile of gross stuff on the pi looks like a garage sale barfed up from the belly of a whale.

Despite all the noise and activity, Ester assures me that the *Nautilus* content.

'She likes having a crew again,' Ester tells me. 'She likes being care

I'm glad for that. I don't want to put my friends in any more danger. the other hand, I struggle to contain my resentment and worry. Do we *want* to care for this submarine? Do I trust her after what she did to my parents? I wonder what Nemo would tell me. Did he die aboard his shi because he loved it so much, or because it became his personal prison?

Thankfully, I don't get much time to brood. The crew keeps me busy whenever they find something that needs opening, which happens roug every six seconds. Among our finds: the weapons bay, with a complem four very old but probably still dangerous alt-tech torpedoes. We decid leave those alone for now and hope they don't blow up.

The dive chamber has a dozen sets of nemonium-mesh dive suits, he and tanks. Just cleaning these, figuring out how they work and testing for usability could take another month.

On the bottom level of the sub (there are three levels total), we find shuttle bay with a smaller mini sub nested inside.

'That's the skiff,' Ophelia informs me. 'And, no, we haven't tried it

She shrugs and blows a strand of grey hair from her eyes. I'm startir appreciate just how much work she and Luca have done on the *Nautilu* how much remains to be done.

The skiff itself is fascinating. It has seats for two, under a transparer that is sleeker in profile than the eyes on the bridge. The body construc likewise smooth and hydrodynamic, with small pectoral stabilizers and tapered serrated tail. It looks like it was modelled after a bluefin tuna, the fastest fish in the world. How it moves, though, I can't imagine. I s room for any kind of engine.

On an external inspection of the hull, scuba divers Kay and Tia disc large hollow sheath on the underbelly of the sub, like a cross between open mouth of a baleen whale and the air intake on a fighter jet, but no can figure out what it's for. Like most of our other discoveries, we don mess with it.

By the evening, the crew is exhausted but still buzzing with excitem They can imagine a future for HP again, at Lincoln Base. We'll work *Nautilus* all summer, or longer if need be, taking our time to learn the submarine's secrets. We can put its technology to use, building up an unbeatable edge against Land Institute. Then … Well, then we will hav options. We can come out of hiding, let our loved ones know we survi We can rebuild our school and hold LI accountable for their attack.

I don't trust these dreams any more than I trust the *Nautilus*. But I sı and nod and let the others talk. I think about what Gem told me – how glad I'm in charge. Why, then, do I feel like such a fraud?

For dinner, our orangutan chef feeds us homemade seaweed gnocch creamy lemon garlic sauce, followed by a delicious tiramisu cake. Bec clearly we all need more caffeine and sugar.

Afterwards, Jupiter is in such a generous mood he lets some of the c switch off *The Great British Bake Off* so they can play retro games on PlayStation and GameCube. Others volunteer to return to the *Nautilus* Luca for some nighttime 'detail work'. I'm not sure what that means. I afraid tomorrow morning I'll find the *Nautilus*'s hull decorated with airbrushed flames.

I don’t even see Nelinha until bedtime. Ester is already snoring whe
Cephalopod friend arrives, grinning and covered in machine grease.

‘Luca says we’ll take the *Nautilus* for a short spin tomorrow,’ she w
to me, ‘if you can convince it to move!’

I suppose I should be thrilled. I might achieve what every Dakkar si
1800s has dreamed of: getting the *Nautilus* back into action.

‘Yeah.’ I try to sound enthusiastic for Nelinha’s sake. ‘That would b
amazing!’

But I go to sleep more unsettled than ever.

I feel like someone has opened *my* brain’s access panels and started
cleaning out all the excess goop. I’m not sure I want them in there, ren
the residue and debris of my life. Who will I be when they’ve finished
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Only this time my underwater tomb looks like the bridge of the *Nautil*

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While I sleep, I have more nightmares about being trapped and drowning. Only this time my underwater tomb looks like the bridge of the *Nautilus*.



CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

The next morning, I'm up early again to dive.

Socrates is nowhere to be seen. In fact, the lagoon seems devoid of a dolphins. This doesn't help my sense of foreboding.

At breakfast, my classmates are in good spirits. Trying to sail the *Na* will be the most challenging thing we've ever done, and I can practical smell the adrenalin in the air, along with the scent of Jupiter's blueberr muffins.

Linzi Huang reports that last night in the sickbay, Dr Hewett farted i sleep. Apparently, this means his bodily systems are working better. Sl jokes that he'll be lecturing us again in no time. Cooper Dunne claims a dream about how to fix the *Nautilus*'s torpedoes. His fellow Sharks t him about doing his best thinking while he's unconscious. Kay Ramsa hasn't smiled since she lost her sister in the attack on HP, actually laug one of Robbie Barr's corny jokes – something about how many nuclea engineers it takes to change a light bulb. Cephalopod humour – I don't

Some of the crew are whispering about how creepy the old sub is, w just makes them more excited. A few gossip about where Captain Nem body was found, and how exactly my parents were killed. They try to l these conversations out of my earshot, so as not to upset me. Unfortun can read lips.

Everybody seems to think that our first spin in the *Nautilus* will be a success.

'You've got the Nemo touch!' Kiya Jensen tells me, as if she wasn't questioning my taking command of the *Varuna* just a few days ago.

Even Nelinha, who knows how tricky advanced tech can be, seems perfectly at ease. ‘We are about to operate the oldest, most complicate submarine on the planet,’ she says. ‘Aren’t you even a little excited?’

I don’t know how to answer her. These days, I’m having trouble distinguishing between excitement and terror.

After cleaning up from breakfast (because time, tide and dirty dishes for no one), we gather on the *Nautilus*’s dock for a pre-dive briefing. T Cephalopods have brought their tool kits. The Sharks have brought the weapons. Gemini Twain has so many guns and other dangerous object strapped to his body he looks like he’s expecting to fight off a mermai apocalypse.

He catches me looking and shrugs like, *You never know.*

The *Nautilus* herself appears unchanged since yesterday. No flames been painted on her prow, thank goodness. Her giant insect eyes glint i dim light of the cavern. In the water around her, the multicoloured phytoplankton are still putting on their Holi festival.

The submarine looks timeless – as if she *literally* exists outside of ti She doesn’t belong in the twenty-first century any more than she belon the nineteenth. I try to imagine how lonely that would feel, especially i creator scuttled me at the bottom of a volcanic grotto for over a centur Would I even be *sane* after all that time?

I don’t realize I’ve zoned out from Luca’s lecture until he says, ‘As sure Ana would agree.’

Everybody looks at me.

‘Sorry, what?’

My classmates laugh.

‘Ana is simply proving my point,’ Luca says, giving me a good-natu smile. ‘We must stay focused at all times and take things slow. For tod task is simple. If we can submerge the *Nautilus* and resurface, that will triumph!’

‘Aww, but, Dad,’ Halimah jokes, ‘can’t we just take a short spin aro the lake?’

‘I want to see what she can do in the open sea!’ Dru counters.

The others clap and whoop in approval.

‘Hold on,’ I whisper to Ester. ‘How does the sub get from here to th sea?’

‘Luca was just saying there’s an underwater tunnel that leads out pa
atoll.’ She madly jots down this information on her note cards. ‘It’s pr
an old lava vent. Do you think I should write *lava vent* or just *tunnel*?’

Ophelia claps twice, loud and sharp, to get our attention. ‘Freshmen

The group falls silent. For the first time, I appreciate that Ophelia is
teacher as well as a scientist. I bet her classes would’ve been hard. Sup
interesting, but hard.

‘So, then,’ she continues. ‘We will take this assignment *seriously*. T
Nautilus has not been operated in almost two hundred years. We must
Ana, and the rest of us, time to acclimatize. It will be a bit like learning
ride a horse.’

Meadow Newman frowns. ‘The sub is still a machine, right? You m
sound like a wild animal!’

The *Nautilus* is not amused. The whole ship begins to hum.

Ester yells, ‘Look out!’

She hits the deck as water blasts from either side of the *Nautilus*’s p
arcing backwards over the top of the ship. The starboard deluge falls
harmlessly into the lake, but the port-side spray soaks all of us from he
foot.

There’s a moment of stunned silence.

Meadow looks flabbergasted. ‘I’m sorry, *Nautilus*! You are a magni
creature!’

The crew starts laughing. Top barks and shakes himself off. I can’t h
but crack a smile. Now we know that the submarine has pride, good he
and maybe even a sense of humour, given the fact that it didn’t try to k

I’m starting to think my fears were overblown. We’re among friends
We’re safe. The *Nautilus* just wants some respect. All we have to do is
one quick dive. Then we can fix whatever leaks occur, come back tom
and try again. We have plenty of time.

That’s when Socrates breaches in the middle of the lake. He splashe
sideways, making as much noise as possible. A moment later, his head
up at the base of the pier. He chatters, clicks and whistles at me urgent

‘Whoa,’ Gem says. ‘How did he find us?’

But that’s not the right question. The question is *why*.

‘Something’s wrong,’ Ester says, her water-blotted note cards forgo
her hands.

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Socrates bucks his head backwards – a signal I remember well. *Let's Hurry!*

My insides feel like they're plunging into the Mariana Trench. My foreboding starts to make terrible sense.

'Everybody!' I yell. 'Hey!'

I don't have Ophelia's skill at getting the class's attention, but the al my voice makes an impression. The others turn towards me.

Nelinha frowns at the dolphin, then at me.

'What's going on?' she asks. 'You okay?'

My hands are shaking. 'None of us are okay. I think the *Aronnax* ha us.'

Socrates bucks his head backwards – a signal I remember well. *Let's go! Hurry!*

My insides feel like they're plunging into the Mariana Trench. My foreboding starts to make terrible sense.

'Everybody!' I yell. 'Hey!'

I don't have Ophelia's skill at getting the class's attention, but the alarm in my voice makes an impression. The others turn towards me.

Nelinha frowns at the dolphin, then at me.

'What's going on?' she asks. 'You okay?'

My hands are shaking. 'None of us are okay. I think the *Aronnax* has found us.'



CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

My announcement douses the class's spirits more effectively than the *Nautilus*'s hose-down.

For a few chaotic moments, the entire class mills around asking 'Wh What?' while I try to explain why I'm so sure we've been found. For s reason, 'The dolphin is telling me so' doesn't clear up the confusion. Meanwhile, Ester and Top try to interview Socrates, but that isn't goin The dolphin is highly agitated. Judging from his body language, his on message is *Leave now*.

Finally, Ophelia restores order. She gives each house a different assignment: Sharks to check the island's defensive grid; Cephalopods t out drone reconnaissance; Orcas to monitor communications and LOC Dolphins to sweep the *Varuna* one more time for tracking devices.

'And the four prefects,' Ophelia says, 'stay with Luca and me.'

Our hosts lead Franklin, Tia, Gem and me aboard the *Nautilus*.

This time, the bridge controls light up as soon as I step into the roon strides over to the comm station and manipulates the LOCUS sphere. H able to turn it just by holding his hands on either side. Three days using LOCUS aboard the *Varuna* and I never even thought to try that.

'I see nothing,' he announces.

'Check again,' Ophelia says. 'Set the LOCUS to maximum radius.'

'Of course I have set the LOCUS to …' Luca falters. He adjusts a di the control console. 'There. I have set the LOCUS to maximum radius nothing.'

‘We’re in the middle of a mountain,’ Gem says. ‘That’s got to affect *Nautilus*’s sensors.’

Luca smiles thinly. ‘Not as much as you might think. Even through hundreds of metres of solid rock, these instruments are still more sensi than anything else in the base.’

‘But if the *Aronnax* has dynamic camouflage,’ I say, ‘which it proba does –’

‘We should see thermal variations, nevertheless.’ Ophelia frowns. ‘I perhaps not until it gets closer. *Too* close. Tia, are the drones online ye should be able to check with the nav console.’

‘Uh …’ Tia fiddles with a few knobs. She spins the LOCUS sphere. for a brilliant Cephalopod, it takes a few seconds to learn a new interfa don’t … Wait.’

She hits a toggle. A swarm of purple dots appears on the holosphere ‘Yeah. They’re fanning out in a search perimeter. But, if the *Aronnax* i there, won’t the drones give away our position?’

‘If the *Aronnax* is out there,’ Luca says grimly, ‘they already know here, and we have much bigger problems.’

I clench my fists. I hate the idea that we might have led our enemies sanctuary. ‘How could they have tracked us? We swept the *Varuna*. W camouflaged and silent. We did everything Dr Hewett told us …’

Even as I say that, my conviction evaporates. Hewett could’ve been working for Land Institute after all and set us up to fail. Or maybe som else on board was the traitor, and they sent a communication we didn’t Just thinking about it makes me nauseated.

‘We can’t know,’ Luca says. ‘Clearly, LI has managed to keep a lot their advances secret. Theodosius warned us of his designs for the *Aro* when he first came to HP. He claimed his sub would rival the *Nautilus* didn’t believe LI would actually be able to build it for at least another or two. If they’ve done it so quickly, without us even being aware …’

Gem shoulders his collection of rifles. ‘But Lincoln Base is well def right? We saw the turrets on the way in.’

‘We have defences, yes,’ Ophelia says. ‘We can fend off almost any regular navy could throw at us. But we can’t be sure what the *Aronnax* capabilities are. We have to assume the worst.’

Franklin laces his fingers nervously. The blue streak in his hair has t violet in the glow of the bridge lights. ‘We saw what the *Aronnax* did t

t the What happens if one of those warheads hits this island?'

'Wait,' Tia says. 'Drones six and seven just went dark.'

Ophelia hurries to her side. 'Did you try rerouting –?'

tive 'Yeah. Sending drones five and eight to sweep that grid … Now *the*
gone dark, too.'

ıbly 'EMP weapon, maybe?' Gem asks.

'Perhaps,' Luca says. 'Four drones malfunctioning at once is unlikel

Ɜut Something in that grid does not wish to be seen.'

t? You 'Relative location?' I ask.

'Roughly three kilometres north by northwest,' Tia reports.

Even 'That gives us minutes at best,' Ophelia says.

ıce. 'I She and Luca lock eyes. They seem to come to a silent agreement.

'Ana,' Luca says, 'you have to take the *Nautilus* away from here, ou
. open sea. She *cannot* fall into LI's possession.'

s out Gem steps back as if pushed. 'Hold on. We don't even know if the s
move.'

we're 'You were just lecturing us on taking things slowly!' Franklin agree

'And now we have no time,' Ophelia says, her voice strained. 'If the
to this *Aronnax* put a tracker on the *Varuna*, they will be focused on Lincoln
'e were not the *Nautilus* herself. We have enough defences to keep them occup
while you escape.'

'We can help you fight them off!' I say. 'Why take the risk of leavir

ıebody I know my real motive for saying this. It's not about the sub.

: detect. I left Dev and HP collapsed around him. I can't watch the same thin
happen to Lincoln Base. I can't run away and again watch people I car
of die.

nnax 'My dear,' Luca says, 'the greatest risk is that Land Institute acquire
, but hesubmarine. That is a risk to the entire world. The *Nautilus* will listen tc
decade am confident in her seaworthiness. She should have basic propulsion.
camouflage is operational.'

'ended, 'That's true,' Tia says. 'We checked it yesterday.'

'She can run and hide,' Ophelia concludes, 'but her long-range weaj
'thing a are non-functional. In a fight, she'd be helpless.'

:'s 'Also true,' Gem says. 'We don't know how half her weapons syste
work. And those torpedoes …' He shakes his head sadly.

:urned 'Sitting here,' Ophelia says, 'the *Nautilus* is simply a prize waiting t
:o HP. taken. On the open sea, at least she has a chance.'

The lights briefly dim. There is a clunking sound somewhere in the decks. I can't help but feel that the *Nautilus* is coughing to get my atte *Um, yeah, get me out of here.*

The idea of the open sea must be appealing to her after sitting in this cavern for so long. Still, my heart flops around in my chest. I wish I co Luca and Ophelia command the ship, or Gem … But I am the only Da has to be me.

I hate my DNA.

'If we do this …' I say. '*If* – then what about Dr Hewett? We can't r him.'

'Oh, I'm staying behind,' Franklin says, like that should be obvious. not leaving my patient in the middle of treatment. Ester can be acting prefect.'

'But –'

'I'm staying, too,' Tia says. 'Ophelia and Luca will need help with t island's defensive systems. Besides, Nelinha is your best combat engir

Tears well in my eyes. 'Tia, I never –'

'Hey, it's fine.' She squeezes my arm. 'We all have different strengt Working on this sub …' She glances around nervously. 'Beautiful as s that's not one of mine.'

'We would welcome your help in the base,' Luca says. Then he turn me. 'Ana, the tunnel from this cavern emerges south of the atoll, direct opposite the *Aronnax*'s approach vector. That should put the island bet you and our enemies. We will do our best to draw their attention and b time.'

I remember Hewett's words to the guards on the docks in San Aleja *Buy us time.*

'But if they take the island,' I say, 'or destroy it …'

The memory of Harding-Pencroft crumbling into the Pacific floats i back of my vision like an old-fashioned photograph resolving in a bath silver nitrate.

Luca gives me a sad smile. 'My dear, do not worry. I have no intent getting myself killed.'

'Or getting *me* killed,' Ophelia adds dryly.

'Of course,' Luca agrees. 'You can take Jupiter on board, however. enjoy the adventure, and he's quite familiar with the sub's galley. Besi

who knows? Perhaps all this is a false alarm! Or perhaps Lincoln Base destroy the *Aronnax* and save the day!'

I can tell he doesn't believe either scenario, but he wants to keep my up.

Everyone looks at me, waiting for my decision. In the end, it has to call. The *Nautilus* will only move for me.

I turn to Gem. I wait for him to tell me that he, too, is staying behind will want to be where the fight is.

'Oh, no,' he says, reading my expression. 'My orders are to keep yo Where you go, I go.'

Three days ago, this response would have irritated me. I can imagine myself saying, *No, really, that's okay. Go shoot some things. I'll be fir*

Now I'm grateful to have his support. To my surprise, he's starting t like someone I *want* at my side, like Ester and Nelinha, and I'm not su to process what that means.

'All right,' I say, before I can change my mind. 'Luca, I will hold yo your promise. You do *not* get yourselves killed.' I take a deep breath a Gem. 'Gather the crew. Get the orangutan. I'm taking command of the *Nautilus*.'

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I can tell he doesn't believe either scenario, but he wants to keep my spirits up.

Everyone looks at me, waiting for my decision. In the end, it has to be my call. The *Nautilus* will only move for me.

I turn to Gem. I wait for him to tell me that he, too, is staying behind. He will want to be where the fight is.

'Oh, no,' he says, reading my expression. 'My orders are to keep you safe. Where you go, I go.'

Three days ago, this response would have irritated me. I can imagine myself saying, *No, really, that's okay. Go shoot some things. I'll be fine.*

Now I'm grateful to have his support. To my surprise, he's starting to feel like someone I *want* at my side, like Ester and Nelinha, and I'm not sure how to process what that means.

'All right,' I say, before I can change my mind. 'Luca, I will hold you to your promise. You do *not* get yourselves killed.' I take a deep breath and face Gem. 'Gather the crew. Get the orangutan. I'm taking command of the *Nautilus*.'



CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

Within fifteen minutes, we're all aboard.

Nelinha gives me a high five before leading the Cephalopods to the room. The Orcas lug in crates of food and medical supplies, along with impressive collection of Jupiter's cookware, while the orangutan waddl along next to them, signing, *Careful with that.*

Gem sends his Sharks to the weapons room to make sure our antiqu torpedoes are secured. Then he follows me and the other Dolphins to th bridge.

Lee-Ann takes dive control. Virgil takes communications. Halimah navigation. That's a no-brainer, since she's our best pilot. Gem takes th weapons console, though we don't have many weapons to speak of. Ja stands by as my runner in case ship-wide communication goes down. (even *have* ship-wide communication?)

I study the captain's chair.

I'm sure the new Florentine seaweed-leather upholstery will be comfortable. The purple mood lighting around the base is a nice touch. armrest controls seem simple enough: place hands on globes, hope the *Nautilus* responds.

But this chair is still where my ancestor died. His body sat there with for 150 years. This is the central altar in the Dakkar family mausoleum

I have to make it more than that. I have to make this a living, workin again.

I take my post. The chair's padding sighs as it presses against my ba

The flurry of bridge activity dies down. Everyone turns, waiting for commands. I feel like a little girl playing pretend, the way Dev and I u

do when we were small.

'*Nautilus*,' I say in Bundeli. (In case you're wondering, the word is Huge surprise.) 'I need access to all systems, please. Our crew is on bo We're ready to get underway.'

From the organ comes a soft middle C. Then an octave up, another C in, and then an octave below, until it sounds like an entire orchestra tur itself. The volume crescendoes. The hull rumbles. Floor plating vibrate under my feet. Around the bridge, previously dark dials and gauges bli life.

The organ falls silent.

'Okay,' Lee-Ann mutters nervously. 'That was different.'

Nelinha's voice crackles overhead from a metal speaker shaped like daffodil. 'Ana, you did it! Looks like we've got full power. And that re button for super cavitation? It's glowing now!' There's interference on line as she has a hasty debate with her colleagues. 'Yeah, I know, I kn won't push it.'

'Stand by,' I say. 'All we need are basic thrust and depth control.'

I realize I'm not even sure Nelinha can hear me. I grip my armrest c 'Is this thing on?'

My words boom from speakers across the bridge, reverberating thro ship. Thanks a lot, *Nautilus*.

'Engineering?' I try again. This time, there's no Voice of God echo.

'Oh, yeah,' Nelinha says. I can hear the smile in her voice. 'We're a awake down here now.'

I try to remember my commands and operation procedures. I really had paid more attention to Colonel Apesh's one lecture on submarine protocol last fall.

'Helm?'

'Aye,' says Halimah.

'Dive?'

'Aye,' says Lee-Ann.

'Comm?'

'Aye, Captain.' Virgil uses the title without a trace of irony.

'Weapons?' I ask Gem.

'Uh …' He stares at his console. 'I mean … aye? Short-range Leyde guns, maybe. And this button apparently electrifies the outer hull, but whether it works or not –'

The panel sparks, shocking his fingers. ‘Ow! Okay, sorry, *Nautilus*. *notilas*. Weapons, aye.’

oard. ‘Right.’ I can’t believe I’m doing this. ‘Lines free. Hatches sealed … Helm, take us out. Ahead slow.’

C joins ‘Ahead slow, aye,’ Halimah says.

ning The floor shudders. A wake swells over the great domed windows. V

es begin to move.

nk to ‘Yes!’ Virgil cheers.

Halimah and Lee-Ann give each other a fist bump.

I can’t celebrate quite so easily. I’m afraid my next command will e thousands of leaks in the sub and get us all drowned.

a ‘Engine room,’ I say, ‘rig for dive.’

ed ‘Engine room,’ Nelinha responds, ‘rig for dive, aye.’

the ‘Weapons room,’ Dru Cardenas reports. ‘We are secured, Captain.’

ow. We ‘LIBRARY,’ Ester’s voice announces. ‘DITTO.’

‘Library?’ I look around, realizing for the first time that Ester is not bridge. I guess I just assumed she would follow me.

ontrol. ‘Well, I have to be somewhere,’ Ester says. ‘Besides, Jupiter brough maple scones.’

ugh the Top barks, rattling the speakers. He’s probably saying, *Yay for oran*

‘Ester, to the bridge, please,’ I say. ‘I need your help reading the shi

‘Aye, Captain.’ She sighs.

ll ‘And bring me a scone?’

‘Me, too, please,’ says Virgil.

wish I Halimah, Lee-Ann, Jack and Gem all raise their hands.

‘Six scones,’ I say.

‘Six scones, aye,’ Ester says. ‘Would you like any espresso drinks w that today?’

I can’t tell if she’s kidding. ‘We’re good, thanks.’

Though a café au lait would be … No.

Wait. What am I doing?

‘Dive control.’ I take a deep breath, then turn to Lee-Ann. ‘Set deptl metres. Here goes nothing.’

Lee-Ann grins. ‘Aye, Captain. Here goes nothing.’

en The water rises outside, engulfing the bow windows. The *Nautilus* submerges. For the first time in a century and a half, she sails out unde own power.

And then we hit something.

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And then we hit something.



CHAPTER FORTY

The sub shudders and screeches.

‘All stop!’ I yell.

The screeching continues like nails on a chalkboard until we lose ou forward momentum. I take a shaky breath, wondering if we’ve just rui world’s most important invention.

‘What was that?’ I ask.

‘Ah, that’s on me.’ Halimah grimaces. ‘The LOCUS was set for lon range scans …’

She toggles a switch. Her console’s holosphere expands to the size c medicine ball. A glowing purple dot still marks our position in the cen now I can see our immediate surroundings. Lacey nets of green light d the cavern walls. Rising from the lake bottom are half a dozen spires o The tip of one is right underneath us – a pokey finger of death touchin *Nautilus*’s belly.

I grit my teeth. Luca and Ophelia might have warned us about the fc giant stalagmites we’d be navigating through. At least they could’ve se LOCUS back to short-range. Then again, our departure was a bit rushe

‘No, that’s my fault,’ I tell Halimah. ‘I gave the order. Damage repo

She tries to make sense of her readouts. Given the *Nautilus*’s style, I half expecting a brass plaque to pop up from the console with the wor *OUCH* written in fancy calligraphy.

Meanwhile the other bridge crew readjust their LOCUS displays.

‘Oh, yeah, look at that,’ Lee-Ann mutters. ‘Giant rocks.’

Ester rushes onto the bridge with a plate of scones. At her feet, Top into a play bow, like, *Where's the party?*

'DID WE HIT A ROCK?' Ester demands.

From the overhead speaker, Nelinha's voice announces, 'I think we rock.'

'Thanks, we got that,' I say. 'Can anybody tell if we took damage?'

'Not that I see,' Nelinha says. 'But let's not do it again.'

'Agreed. Helm, ease us off the pokey finger of death, please.'

'Aye, Captain.' Halimah sounds relieved.

'I have the tunnel entrance,' Virgil says at the comm station. 'Fiftee degrees starboard, range ninety metres, depth twenty metres.'

I try not to shudder. One of the first things you learn in dive school i dangerous underwater caves can be. They're the places most likely to l you.

Being in a sub does not make me feel any better about our chances. barely out of the driveway and we've already almost impaled ourselve Nevertheless, I decide that it wouldn't be good form for the captain to *We're all going to die!*

'Make fifteen degrees starboard,' I say. 'Make depth twenty metres. slow. Let's get to the exit without hitting anything else, folks.'

Gem laughs.

I scowl at him.

'Right, that wasn't funny,' he agrees.

We start to move again. I study the LOCUS displays. The tunnel ent looms closer, like the mouth of a whale.

'Range forty metres,' Halimah announces. 'Depth is steady at twent metres.'

I glance at Ester, who's standing on my right with her plate of bake goods. 'How does the *Nautilus* seem to you?'

'Calm,' she says. 'Want a scone?'

Calm is good. And, yes, I want a scone.

I hear no groans or creaks, no cries of alarm from the corridors. Still imagine a thousand little leaks springing up all along the sub's ancient plating.

'Jack,' I say, 'make a pass through the ship, would you? Check on a hands.'

'Aye.' He looks relieved to have a job. He grabs a scone and runs of

goes ‘Tunnel entrance ten metres,’ Halimah says. ‘This’ll be tight.’

‘You understand how to steer this thing?’ Virgil asks.

The pipe organ plays a diminished chord, making us all flinch.

hit a ‘I mean … do you know how to steer this beautiful vessel?’ Virgil c himself.

‘I think so,’ Halimah says. ‘*Nautilus*, help me out here. Captain?’

It takes me a second to realize she’s asking me a question. I’m still r used to being called Captain.

‘Ahead slow,’ I say. ‘Course corrections at your discretion.’

n ‘Aye.’ Halimah turns a lever ever so slightly.

As soon as we reach the tunnel, a tremor rattles the bridge. Bubbles is how cascade over the forward windows.

kill I grip my armrests. ‘What was –?’

‘Explosion!’ Gem yells, a little louder than necessary. ‘N-not close, We’re though. That was about …’ He fiddles with his controls and his holosp s. changes to a deep purple colour. ‘Whoa, that’s cool.’

scream ‘Something about an explosion?’ I prompt.

‘Right, sorry. There was a detonation against the north rim of the atc Ahead about a kilometre away. Torpedo, maybe?’

‘Massive shock wave for a torpedo,’ Virgil says.

‘The *Aronnax*,’ Ester says.

That name is more unsettling than the organ’s diminished chord.

I want to believe that Luca and Ophelia blew our enemies out of the rance but I know we couldn’t be that lucky. More likely the *Aronnax* was ser warning shot, letting Lincoln Base know they mean business. At least t y cave hasn’t collapsed on top of us yet.

‘Steady as she goes,’ I say.

l Halimah takes us into the tunnel.

Outside the windows, the constellations of phytoplankton disappear a metre above our heads, the ceiling of the lava tube slithers past, glist in the purple glow of the bridge. Of course Nemo would make his ligh , I purple, I realize. The longest light waves, blue and purple, are the last hull to disappear underwater. I wonder if the *Nautilus* has purple headlights olde windshield wipers.

ll The holospheres at all the stations suddenly flicker and die.

‘Halimah?’ I ask, alarmed.

f.

‘It’s okay.’ Her left hand stays steady on the lever. Her right flits fro
control to control as if she’s used this console her whole life. ‘I was
anticipating that.’

orrects ‘The walls of the lava tube have an exceptionally dense metal conte
Lee-Ann tells me. ‘They’re messing with our LOCUS. We’ll have to u
physical readouts until we reach the other side.’

ıot Halimah doesn’t reply. She’s a little busy trying to keep us in one pi

‘Tactical is down, too,’ Gem says. ‘I can’t tell what’s going on out t

‘Did you get a position on the *Aronnax*?’ I ask.

‘Nothing. Maybe they’re camouflaged.’

‘That could be good,’ Ester says, feeding a bit of scone to Top. ‘Ma
they won’t be able to see us, either.’

Speaking of which …

‘Engine room, report,’ I say. ‘How are we looking?’

ıhere ‘Well,’ Nelinha says, ‘the glowing things are still glowing. The hum
things are still humming. I think we’re good.’

‘If we have dynamic camouflage, now would be a good time to acti

ɔll, ‘Uh … yeah. Stand by.’

Our passage through the tunnel seems to take forever. Sweat trickle
my back. My shirt sticks to the fine Italian seaweed leather.

No one speaks. Even Top is quiet, sitting patiently at Ester’s side, w
for more pastry bites.

water, Ester rests her hand on the back of my chair. ‘The *Nautilus* feels goo
ıding a tells me. ‘I think she’s excited.’

the That makes one of us.

Jack returns, out of breath from his run through the ship. ‘No proble
reports.

Nelinha announces over the intercom: ‘Camouflage active, babe. I n

. Only Captain. Captain babe.’

ening A moment later, the LOCUS displays flicker to life again.

ting ‘We’re out,’ Halimah sighs.

colours ‘Yes!’ Lee-Ann gives her a round of applause. Jack whoops and pu

s. Or ye fist. From the hallway behind us, I hear the echoes of cheers from the ı
the crew.

Our enthusiasm doesn’t last.

‘Ana!’ Gem shouts, forgetting the whole ‘Captain’ thing. ‘I’ve pinp
the *Aronnax*.’ He turns, his expression grim. ‘That explosion? It didn’t

ɔm *hit* the north side of the atoll. The north side of the atoll is gone.’

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CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

Gem flips a switch. His tactical holosphere expands, showing us a 3-D
of Lincoln Base. The main island rises from the lagoon, ringed by the a
that used to be an almost perfect concentric circle. Now, in addition to
channel the *Varuna* navigated through a few days ago, there's a much
break in the northern rim. A section of beach and brambles the size of
soccer field has simply disappeared into the sea.

The purple blip of the *Nautilus* glows at the southern edge of the dis
Directly opposite us, to the north of the broken atoll, floats a second pu
dot: the *Aronnax*.

Weapons fire traces like shooting stars across the holosphere, back a
forth between the *Aronnax* and the turrets along what's left of the atoll
after another, the island's defences go dark.

My mouth feels full of wet sand. 'Gem, can you zoom in on the atta

He fiddles with another knob. Suddenly I am seeing the *Aronnax* up
and personal – or at least her holographic image.

As we saw on Dr Hewett's fuzzy drone footage, the ship is shaped li
arrowhead – as if Land Institute retrofitted a stealth bomber for underw
use. Surrounding its hull is a fuzzy violet halo that seems to be soaking
discharges from the base's defences.

'What is that?' I ask. 'Some kind of shield?'

No one has an answer. We stare in horror as the *Aronnax* continues
slow and steady advance towards the island.

Virgil turns. 'Ana … Captain … if they hit the main base with one o
seismic torpedoes –'

'They wouldn't,' Ester says. 'Not if they think their prize is inside.'

Their prize.

I clutch my armrests. I have never hated anything as much as I hate *Aronnax*, but Ester is right. The *Nautilus* and I are prizes in a game of away. We can't be combatants in this fight.

'Orders, Captain?' Halimah sounds composed, but her hands trembl the nav controls – usually not a good thing for a pilot.

I imagine Dr Hewett lying in his medical bed, Franklin shielding hir debris rains from the ceiling. I picture Lincoln Base's corridors shakin lights flickering, Tia, Luca and Ophelia running desperately from one panel to another, trying to maintain power as their weapons systems ar systematically destroyed.

I wish I could help, but that's not our mission. There's nothing we c for Lincoln Base.

'Helm, set course due south,' I say. 'Full speed. Whatever that is.'

'Course due south, full speed, aye.'

'Dive, make our depth …' I blink, trying to clear my head. I check t holosphere above Lee-Ann's console. 'Make depth twenty-five metres

'Twenty-five metres, aye,' Lee-Ann says.

In the pit of my stomach, I feel the sub start to accelerate and descer

'Captain.' Nelinha's voice crackles over the loudspeaker. 'I think m we should back off the speed. I'm getting some weird readings from – THAT'S NOT GOOD.'

The *Nautilus* shudders. Over the intercom, I hear the Cephalopods y Behind us, down the corridor, more crew members shout with alarm.

'Weapons room!' Dru's voice comes over the comm. 'I've got greer coming out of the ductwork!'

'Galley!' The voice is Brigid Salter's. Behind her, I can hear an upse orangutan whooping and grunting. 'There's some kind of sludge pouri from the air vents. It's spraying all over Jupiter's pots and pans, and he NOT okay with it!'

'Engine room!' Nelinha yells. 'Main engines are down! We've got g repeat, we've got goo!'

Halimah bangs her fist against the nav console. 'Captain, we're deac water.'

I curse under my breath. I remember the wad of putrefied seaweed t Luca pulled from the wiring compartment my first time on board. I im flood of that foul-smelling Victorian-era sewage spewing from every d

and crevice around the ship, forced into circulation by the demands we
the putting on this old bucket of nemonium. What was I thinking, treating
keep- *Nautilus* like a functioning submarine?

‘Nelinha,’ I call through the comm, ‘we *need* propulsion. Can you re

e over The only answer is static and garbled shouting in the background.

‘I’ll go.’ Jack Wu charges off again.

n as ‘Oh …’ Gem steps away from his console. ‘No, no, no.’

g, its I assume goo must be leaking out of his console, but that’s not the
control problem. On Gem’s tactical display, the *Aronnax* has changed course.
e base’s remaining turrets continue to fire on her, but the *Aronnax* doesn
bother to shoot back. She veers east, making her way around the edge
an do atoll.

‘What is she doing?’ Lee-Ann mutters.

‘They’ve spotted us,’ I say.

‘How?’ Halimah demands. ‘Our camouflage reads as operational.’

he ‘Maybe it isn’t,’ Virgil says. ‘It could’ve gone down with propulsio
.’ maybe the *Aronnax* is picking up our thermal variations, like Ophelia s

‘It doesn’t matter right now,’ I say. ‘In less than a minute, they’ll ha
ıd. direct line of fire. I need options.’

aybe ‘There’s the skiff,’ Gem says. ‘I could pilot it out, maybe draw their
OH, and buy you time. If I can get close enough to the *Aronnax* with conve
weapons –’

elling. ‘No, that’s suicide,’ I tell him. ‘Do we have any shieldy things?’

‘Shieldy things …’ Gem frowns at his console. ‘Um, I don’t –’

ı slime ‘*Nautilus*.’ The voice booms from our speakers so loudly I jump. ‘T
THE *ARONNAX*. SURRENDER OR BE DESTROYED.’

et I recognize that voice. It’s our old friend/interrogation subject Caleb

ng ‘How is this guy back?’ Gem grumbles. ‘I thought Land Institute pu
e is failure.’

‘He must have come up with a really good lie,’ Lee-Ann speculates.
goo! I ‘Maybe put all the blame on his classmates.’

‘Bah,’ Gem says. ‘I should’ve poked holes in his pink-ducky water

l in the ‘YOU’RE MOTIONLESS AND DEFENCELESS IN THAT PIECE
JUNK,’ Caleb continues. ‘GIVE UP NOW, AND WE’LL SPARE YO
hat BASE.’

agine a The *Nautilus* shudders. I don’t think she likes being called junk.
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‘Can we turn off his voice?’ I ask. ‘How is he even broadcasting ove
comm?’

‘I – I’m looking,’ Virgil says, frantically turning dials.

Caleb’s tirade continues at a lower volume: ‘All we want is the *Nau*
and Ana Dakkar. None of you will be harmed. We’ll treat you better th
treated me.’

‘They’re closing,’ Gem tells me. ‘One kilometre out now.’

The island’s defences continue to fire, trying to draw the *Aronnax*’s
attention. Our enemy ignores the barrage. They are locked on us, almo
…

A cramp hits my gut, folding my insides into various origami shapes

‘They were never tracking the *Varuna*,’ I realize. ‘They were trackin

‘How?’ asks Lee-Ann. ‘Is your DNA radioactive or something?’

Over the comm, Nelinha says, ‘Captain, we’ve got an idea. You’re g
to hate it, but –’

‘If you don’t trust me,’ Caleb South interrupts, ‘listen to our captain

I shoot to my feet. ‘Shut off that stupid transmission!’ I yell at Virgi

Then the enemy captain’s voice comes over the intercom and knock
right back into my chair.

‘Hey, sis,’ says Dev. ‘You did a great job. But now it’s time to give

‘Can we turn off his voice?’ I ask. ‘How is he even broadcasting over our comm?’

‘I – I’m looking,’ Virgil says, frantically turning dials.

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The island’s defences continue to fire, trying to draw the *Aronnax*’s attention. Our enemy ignores the barrage. They are locked on us, almost as if …

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‘They were never tracking the *Varuna*,’ I realize. ‘They were tracking *me*.’

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Then the enemy captain’s voice comes over the intercom and knocks me right back into my chair.

‘Hey, sis,’ says Dev. ‘You did a great job. But now it’s time to give up.’



CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

I remember the first time I got nitrogen narcosis.

My instructor took me below a hundred feet with regular air tanks, j show me what ‘rapture of the deep’ felt like. My vision started to tunn couldn’t do simple calculations on my dive computer. I was filled with strange mixture of euphoria and terror. I knew the beautiful blue void kill me if I swam any deeper, but that’s exactly what I wanted to do.

Hearing Dev’s voice makes me feel the same way.

My thoughts turn to syrup. My brother is alive. My brother is a trait

I’m relieved. I’m horrified. I’m spiralling into a blue abyss.

‘This is impossible,’ I say.

The bridge crew stares back at me. They look shocked, confused … They need answers. Once again, I have none.

‘It – it has to be a fake,’ I say. ‘A voice synthesizer –’

‘That’s his voice, Ana.’ Ester frowns at the floor. ‘He’s alive.’

‘But –’

‘*Nautilus*,’ Dev says. ‘Ana, you’re out of time. I need to hear that yc surrender. Otherwise, we fire.’

‘He wouldn’t,’ says Lee-Ann.

‘He did,’ Halimah counters. ‘He’s the one who destroyed HP.’

No, I think. *Not my brother.*

Then I remember what Dev said on our last day, when he gave me n early birthday present. *You’re leaving for your freshman trials today.*

He knew I would be off campus when the attack happened. He play down my concerns about the grid. Land Institute had to have inside he

sabotage the security system. All this time, I've been suspecting my classmates, or Dr Hewett …

The intercom crackles. Nelinha's voice breaks through my stupor. 'U everyone else hear that? Orders, Captain?'

Orders … I almost want to laugh. Why would anyone take orders fr me? I'm a stupid little girl who has been duped by her own brother.

'You okay, Ana?' Gem asks. His expression is concerned, expectant he's waiting for me to grab a lifeline.

I force myself to breathe. I can't spiral into this emotional vacuum r now … not when it would mean abandoning my friends. 'Engine room by.' I turn to Virgil. 'Can they hear us?'

'No,' he says. 'One-way transmission. Pretty sure. Almost positive.'

'Their position?'

Gem checks his panels. 'Half a kilometre out. Holding at our six o'c

How did they find us, despite all our precautions? They were never following the *Varuna*. They were following *me* …

I wanted you to have the pearl for luck, Dev said, *just in case, you k you fail spectacularly or something.*

I stand. My fingers close around my mother's black-pearl pendant. I it from my neck, breaking the chain. Dev had it reset, just for me. The comes away easily from its new setting. Underneath, glued to the gold is a tiny alt-tech receptor.

'Ana, I'm so sorry.' Ester's lower lip quivers. She understands how She knows about being used, being treated like a commodity even by h own family.

'Can I borrow your Leyden gun?' I ask.

She doesn't hesitate. She hands me her pistol.

I set the broken pieces of the necklace on the floor – chain, setting, e the pearl. I can't take any chances. I step back and fire.

Blue tendrils of electricity arc down the length of the chain. The alt- receptor pops and burns like a tiny emergency flare. White curlicues o smoke wreath my mother's pearl.

An acrid tang fills the back of my mouth. I'm not sure if it's from th melting tracker or the bitterness welling up in my throat.

Back on the *Varuna,* Land Institute's assault team went out of their not to hit me with a Leyden gun. They used poison instead. They were hoping to take the whole ship: me, Dr Hewett's map, the DNA-reader,

everything. But if something went wrong they didn't want to risk dama
their tracking device. I was their insurance policy. I led them – I led *D*
Uh, did to the *Nautilus*.

My brother's voice booms through the ship. His tone is intimate and
om pleading, just for me. 'I warned the school, Ana. I told them to evacuat
didn't want them to die. I don't want anyone else to die now, especiall
t, like Oh, god. That garbled audio recording of Dev hadn't come from the
school's intercom. He'd been broadcasting from on board the *Aronnax*
ight I want to scream at him. I want to demand explanations. But there is
ı, stand way I will open communications.

An hour ago, I would have traded the *Nautilus* and the entire world t
to Dev again. Now I want to be as far away from him as possible.

'Engine room,' I say. 'You were talking about options?'

:lock.' A moment of static, then Nelinha responds, 'Yes, but you're not goi
like –'

'I don't like *anything* right now. Talk to me.'

now, 'The cav-drive,' she says. 'It might still be operational. It uses a diff
starter system to communicate with the engines –'

yank Dev's voice overrides hers. 'Harding-Pencroft are not our friends, A
pearl They've been hoarding our family's inheritance for generations. Their
base, stupidity got our parents killed. They're using you. Land Institute gave
command of their prize ship. They want to use our tech to make the wo
I feel. better. Harding-Pencroft would never. They refused to let me even see
ıer *Nautilus*. This was the only way to force their hand. I'm sorry, but it ha
be done. Now we can take what is ours. Yours and mine.'

'N-Nelinha, this cav-drive …' I try to tune out Dev's words, but I fe
I've been gargling with sea-snake venom. 'Are you sure it will work?'

:ven 'Absolutely not,' she says. 'If I push this red button, maybe nothing
happens. Maybe we explode right here. Or maybe we shoot halfway ac
tech the Pacific and smash straight into the side of an underwater mountain
f that's all I've got, unless you can keep Dev talking for another six or s
hours while we make repairs.'

.e I'd rather explode.

'If we manage to get away,' Gem warns, 'the *Aronnax* will turn on I
way Base.'

I know that. Ophelia, Luca, Dr Hewett, Tia, Franklin … How can w
them at the mercy of that sub … of Dev? What has my brother become

the other hand, I can't surrender this crew. The defenders in Lincoln B gave me a mission. They stayed behind to make it possible.

'*Nautilus*, listen to me,' I tell the sub in Bundeli. 'We need to leave immediately. We need to find somewhere safe. If we don't –'

'All right, then.' Dev's pained voice reminds me so much of our fatl Dad's disappointed sigh whenever we misbehaved was always the wo punishment. 'Ana, we're launching an EMP tornado. It won't destroy It'll just knock out your remaining systems. Then we'll board you. Yo stop us. You're a bunch of freshmen on a derelict ship you don't unde Please don't make us kill your crew.'

Gem yells, 'Torpedo in the water! Ten seconds to impact!'

'Engine room!' I shout. 'Punch the cav-drive *now*!'

For three heartbeats – nothing.

Then sheets of aerated water blast over the front windows like we'v plunged into the world's most powerful carwash. The ship shoots forw violently I am thrown backwards across the bridge. I feel a dull *crack* head hits metal, and everything goes dark.

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CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

When I wake, Ester is standing over me, wearing surgeon's scrubs. My temples throb. The back of my skull feels like it's encased in ice.

'You're in the sickbay,' Ester says. 'You've been out for four hours. need to rest –'

I roll sideways out of the bed, trying to find my feet. I step on Top, w yelps in protest. Ester grabs my arm to steady me.

'This is not resting,' she observes.

'I have to … the ship. Are we safe?'

From somewhere nearby, Nelinha answers, 'For now.'

I try to focus. Multiple da Silvas swirl in the doorway. She's wearin combat boots, a black-and-white plaid kilt and a black hoodie, with bla lipstick to match so she looks like a highlander commando. On her for is a puffy white bandage the size of a dollar bill.

I point unsteadily at her patch. 'Are you okay?'

'Who, me? I'm peachy. When we went to cav-drive, my face had a disagreement with a crankshaft. How are *you* feeling?'

That's a good question. My headache is generating an explosive yie about fifty megatons. I've been unconscious for four hours. At least th saved me from four hours of ugly crying. My brother is alive, and a tra and a mass murderer.

'I'll live,' I decide. 'Who's piloting the ship?'

'Well, Gem has the bridge,' Nelinha says, with less distaste than I w have expected, 'but nobody's piloting at the moment. We're stationary

I struggle to process that. 'How is the crew?'

'We had seventeen injuries,' Ester says. 'Mostly minor.'

‘With Franklin and Tia gone, we only have a crew of eighteen.’

‘I know,’ she agrees. ‘I was lucky. I have good balance. Also, Jupite fine. And Top is fine.’

Top wags his tail. *Can confirm.*

Ester prods my scalp with her fingers. Maybe she’s looking for hole head. She hates physical contact, but when I’m just a patient, she has n problem mercilessly poking.

‘Your ancestor invented super-cavitation drive,’ she says, ‘but he di invent seat belts. We have three people with broken arms, two concuss and one second-degree burn.’

‘Who got burned?’

‘Kay Ramsay.’ Nelinha points behind me.

Kay is lying fast asleep in the next bed over. Her arm is bandaged fr shoulder to fingertips. Poor Kay … I hope this med bay has some kind skin-grafting technology.

I lower my voice. ‘What happened?’

‘She got thrown against a cold-fusion coil.’ Nelinha’s face tightens. things get *hot*. Who knew?’

‘We might want to install body harnesses,’ Ester says. ‘Or at least g little warning next time before we punch to cav-drive.’

I nod sheepishly. Even that motion hurts. ‘I need to get back to the b

‘Not recommended,’ Ester says. ‘You banged your head pretty good tried a scanner-type thingy on you, like a LOCUS for bodies –’

‘So Nemo invented MRIs and CAT scans, too?’ I shiver, hoping Est hasn’t dosed me with ancient alt-tech radiation that will turn me into a

‘I didn’t see any inflammation,’ she says. ‘Still, I’m using equipmen medicine I don’t really understand.’

I get it. She wants me to rest, which is the main thing I can’t do.

I turn to Nelinha. ‘Damage report?’

She spreads her hands. ‘I mean … we’re in one piece? Propulsion is The cav-drive blew a fuse or something. We’re still digging ourselves from the Great Goo Explosion. On the other hand, we have internal po We have air. Our depth is stable at twenty metres. The hull is intact. So okay. We just won’t be going anywhere for a while.’

‘What’s our position?’

She laughs. ‘You won’t believe it. We’re in the Philippine Sea, roug four hundred miles east of Davao.’

I blink, trying to process that. ‘You mean one punch of the cav-drive
us –’

‘About five thousand miles,’ she confirms. ‘It took a couple of hours
you. You were unconscious for the whole thing, but still …’

‘That would take – what, twelve hours in a commercial flight? Six d
sea?’

‘I said you wouldn’t believe it.’

The problem is, I *do* believe it. I add *super-cavitation drive* to the lis
reasons why Land Institute wants this ‘piece of junk’ submarine so bad
That kind of proprietary technology could turn the world upside down.

‘The *Aronnax*,’ I remember, my nerves crackling. ‘Any sign of them

‘None,’ Nelinha says. ‘Our course and bearing were pretty obvious.
Aronnax has a cav-drive, they should have been able to follow us. Sinc
haven’t shown up yet, I think we can assume we have the advantage th

I exhale. We need all the advantages we can get.

On the other hand, we’ve left Lincoln Base at the mercy of the *Aron*
We’re stuck in the middle of the ocean with no propulsion, no allies ar
friendly ports.

At least, I assume so …

I remember asking the *Nautilus* to take us somewhere safe. Did she
this spot to drop out of cav-drive on purpose, or did she simply run out
steam?

‘Is there anything close to us?’ I ask.

Nelinha shrugs. ‘No secret bases that we can detect, if that’s what yo
mean. The Palau Trench is right underneath us – six thousand metres s
down. I wouldn’t want to lose dive control here.’

I feel like I already have. My brain is developing stress fractures. W
here? What now? How can I face my crew when my brother is the cau
all our problems and I led him right to us at Lincoln Base?

My knees give out. Ester grabs my arm to keep me from falling.

‘Ana, you have to sit down, at least,’ she insists.

‘I will,’ I promise. ‘In the main dining room.’ I look at Nelinha. ‘Ga
the crew, will you? And, Ester, I’d appreciate some super-alt-tech aspi
you’ve got any. This is going to be a tough conversation.’

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CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

A tough conversation, and also the world's strangest brunch.

The table only has seating for eight. We bring in as many other chai we can find and put them around the walls. The furniture creaks and sr like mould, but the crew has done their best to clean up the space. The mahogany tabletop gleams. The abalone chandelier glitters overhead. T silverware, each piece engraved with Captain Nemo's crest, has been polished like new.

Jupiter has prepared a delicious selection of macroalgae sandwiches also baked several dozen chocolate-chip cookies, which reinforces my that he is the most essential member of this crew.

Ester wasn't kidding about the number of injuries. Between us, we h enough bandages, splints, casts and slings to build a first-aid man.

Once everyone has had something to eat – it's a very quiet meal – I speak.

'Guys, I had no idea about Dev.' I've practised what to say, but still hardly form the words. 'I thought he was dead. What Dev did – I don't *know* the person who could do that to our school and our friends.'

I brush away a tear. I've known my classmates for two years, but rig I can't read their expressions. Their blurry faces swim in front of my e wonder if this is how Ester feels all the time.

'If you think I was involved somehow,' I say, 'I don't blame you. A point, *I* don't trust me, either. I don't own this ship. You deserve anoth about who will be in charge. Gem can take over, or anyone you choose guess I'm trying to say I'm sorry.'

The only sound is the distant hum of the air circulators.

'Ana,' Gem says at last, 'nobody blames you.'

I stare at him. I'd be less surprised if he told me the ocean was purpl

'You're not your brother,' he continues. 'What he did doesn't reflec you. You've brought us this far and kept us alive.' He looks around the group. 'Anybody disagree? If so, speak up.'

No one does.

I wonder if this is just peer pressure. Gem is a hard person to contra But I sense no discomfort in the crew: no furtive glances, no squirming seats.

A feeling of gratitude wraps around me like a warm quilt. I want to my friends, but that seems insufficient. The best way I can thank them living up to their trust.

'If you're sure,' I say, brushing away another tear, 'then we have a l work to do. Where are we on repairs?'

Their reports do not help my headache. Our to-do list is as long as th submarine. On top of cleaning goop and repairing the systems we brok we made our escape, there are still a thousand things about the *Nautilu* don't understand.

Luca and Ophelia spent two years trying to comprehend this ship. T were HP's best. If we ever want to get underway again, we'll have to complete their work without the benefit of their experience – or their b any other kind of repair facilities. And we don't have two years in whi do it.

Nelinha says what I'm thinking: 'We have to help Lincoln Base.'

Kiya Jensen shifts her broken arm in her sling. I can tell she doesn't what she's about to say.

'I'm just going to put this out there,' she says. 'Our duty is to make the *Nautilus* doesn't fall into anyone else's hands, right? Wouldn't Luc Ophelia tell us *not* to try helping them if there's any chance LI could c the sub?'

She's right, of course. We're riding in the most destabilizing techno breakthrough ever: a leap forward as dramatic as iron weapons or gunp were. And hearing a Shark like Kiya suggest running away hits me lik water in the face.

'Plus,' she continues, 'we're outmatched. Dev wasn't wrong about t We've got a very old, not fully functional sub … beautiful and amazin

though she is …' She says this last part loudly, addressing the chandel
'And we're not trained to operate her. Land Institute sent their senior c
They were foolish not to send alumni, or their adult staff, but still … th
got Dev. They must have been planning this operation for a long time.'

I wonder again why LI sent only students, even if they sent their bes
Maybe it was school culture – fostering self-reliance, like Caleb said –
have a feeling it had more to do with Dev. I can imagine him putting
conditions on his cooperation – that he and only he would be in charge
Aronnax, that LI had to trust him with command to prove they were di
than HP. Maybe, in the back of his mind, he was even trying to level th
playing field, to give HP a fighting chance …

No. I can't think like that. I can't be Dev's apologist. He made his ch
Vile choices. And now, if he fails to deliver the *Nautilus*, I imagine his
friends will turn unfriendly fast.

Nelinha scowls at her sandwich. 'Land Institute killed our friends. T
destroyed HP. Now they're holding Lincoln Base. We can't run away
thenthat.'

Brigid Salter glumly pushes away her plate. She lost her brother at H
knows exactly what Land Institute has done. 'They want the *Nautilus*,
island. Maybe the *Aronnax* left Lincoln Base to follow us.'

Judging from her tone, she desperately wants that to be true. She wa
chance at a fight.

'Or,' Dru suggests, 'sorry to say this, but they could have already
destroyed the base.'

I shake my head. 'They destroyed HP because it was part of their pla
spurred us into leading them to the *Nautilus*. Lincoln Base is different.
Nemo's final resting place. They'll want to explore it. They'll expect t
clues to our location, information about the ships …'

'They'll take the island,' Gem decides. 'Which means they'll take
prisoners.'

I think about those we left behind: Luca, Ophelia, Dr Hewett, Frank
Tia. Even Socrates, though I'm not so worried about him being caught

'They'll keep our people alive,' I say, forcing myself to believe it. 'I
will want to interrogate them.'

I'm thinking of him as our enemy now. Not some faceless group of
students. My own brother. I've fallen into a universe I don't understan
don't want to.

‘How long do we have?’ Gem asks. I understand his implication: *un prisoners are no longer useful*.

I defer to Lee-Ann. She’s our best interrogator. I can no longer tell i ears turn red, though, because they’re gift-wrapped by a ribbon of gauz around her head.

‘Depends on the captors’ patience level,’ she says. ‘Could be weeks imagine Dev – Land Institute is *hoping* we’ll come back. They’ll be w It’ll be useful for them to have live captives.’

I think about the interrogation methods I learned at HP. We were alv taught to avoid cruelty. That’s not our way. Still, some psychological techniques can be devastating, and I doubt Land Institute will take a lig hand. Every day in captivity will feel like an eternity.

‘We can’t take weeks,’ I decide.

‘Also,’ Ester says, ‘we can’t stay here forever. As long as the reacto online, we have limitless power, water and air. But in about seven days run out of food.’

Top rests his head on her thigh. I think he is reminding her that food important and also it tastes good.

‘One week.’ Nelinha scratches the bandage on her forehead. ‘To do impossible. Get engines back up and running.’

‘Get some of those torpedoes functioning,’ Dru adds.

‘Clean the slime out of the vents.’ Gem shudders. ‘So is that the plan Captain? Return to Lincoln Base?’

I stand, trying not to wobble. ‘If anyone thinks we should do the sen thing – running and hiding – speak now.’

No one advocates for the sensible thing.

I love my crew.

‘Okay, then,’ I say. ‘It’s a good thing we’re the best class Harding-P has ever seen. We get the *Nautilus* operational in one week. Then we r to Lincoln Base. And we show Land Institute they’ve messed with the bunch of freshmen.’

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‘Okay, then,’ I say. ‘It’s a good thing we’re the best class Harding-Pencroft has ever seen. We get the *Nautilus* operational in one week. Then we return to Lincoln Base. And we show Land Institute they’ve messed with the wrong bunch of freshmen.’



CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

After this inspiring speech, I eat cookies in the library.

Ester has ordered me to rest for at least one hour while the aspirin sh found on board kicks in. (I think she wants to observe me to see if I act turn into a fish.) While the rest of the crew scurries around, cleaning an repairing, carrying toolboxes and buckets of goop, I try to relax in a mu armchair, an original French copy of *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* in lap.

It feels very meta to be reading a fictional book about the *Nautilus* o board the actual *Nautilus*. I wonder if Nemo read the book before his d and if the inaccuracies annoyed him. At any rate, it isn't autographed *T Nemo, Love, Jules.* I checked.

Ester sits across from me in a love seat. Top snuggles next to her. Es uses a library book as a lap desk, jotting down information on each not then tossing it onto Top before starting a new one. Judging from Top's contented snoring, he does not mind being buried in information.

The fireplace glows cheerfully. I don't know who started it, and I sti don't know how it works or where the smoke goes, but it does take son the damp chill out of the air. I wouldn't even know we were underwate except for the window looking out on the blue void, with the occasiona silvertip shark swimming past.

I'm grateful for Ester's company. I'm sure she has a million other th do, but I imagine she also realizes that if she wasn't watching me, I'd j out of my chair and start working.

'Relax,' she chides me again.

It's difficult to relax when someone keeps telling you to relax.

Only a few days ago, Ester and I sat in a different library, on board t
Varuna, and I was trying to look after *her*. Now we've switched roles.

I flip the pages of the novel. I stop on an illustration of an underwate
funeral. A dozen people in old-fashioned dive suits gather solemnly ar
grave. I remember the scene – one of Captain Nemo's crew members h
died – but I don't remember the details. I hope finding this picture isn'
omen.

'Why did Dev do it?' I murmur. 'How could he have …?'

I can't even put his betrayal into words. He lied to me, put a tracker
collaborated with our enemies. He destroyed our school, killed our tea
and fellow students … all for the sake of a submarine.

Ester puts down her pen. She stares at a spot just above my head. 'W
you think he did it?'

Oof. I forgot Orcas train in psychology. Still, her question is a good

I trace my fingers across the funeral illustration. 'Our parents' death
blamed Harding-Pencroft.'

'Did he ever tell you that?' she asks. 'I mean, before he broadcast it
the *Aronnax*?'

I shake my head. 'He always tried to stay positive for me. He was th
perfect big brother. I guess I never thought about what might be going
behind that smile …'

It's disturbing to think how little I knew about Dev. It's even more
disturbing to realize that he was holding together his positive facade fo
sake, while inside he was stewing in bitterness.

I never saw it. Or at least I never *let* myself see it. Land Institute obv
did. They used it to turn him against HP, and me.

'Captain Nemo had a lot of anger, too.' Ester speaks in a monotone,
recalling a dream from years ago. 'When Ned Land and Professor Aro
met him, he terrified them. The British had killed Nemo's wife and old
child. He hated the European powers. He wanted to dismantle their em
He destroyed their ships, funded rebellions. If Nemo was around today
world governments would probably call him –'

'A terrorist.' I remember Caleb South's accusation about Harding-
Pencroft: *You were protecting the legacy of an outlaw.*

Ester nods. 'Land Institute has always been motivated by fear and a
They want to destroy Nemo's legacy. But they also want to *be* Nemo.'

I study the book's illustration. It's hard to reconcile the idea of Nem terrorist with Nemo the brilliant inventor. Then again, our labels alway depend on who's doing the labelling. Patriot, freedom fighter, terrorist Prince Dakkar was a brown man fighting the colonizers. I'm pretty sur wouldn't have helped his reputation in Europe.

'Wait …' I refocus on Ester. 'Are you saying I shouldn't judge Dev harshly? Or …?'

Ester picks up a new index card. She frowns at it, as if the lines aren parallel. 'I'm just saying that people are complicated. Nemo was a diff man by the time Harding and Pencroft met him: older, bitter, disillusio That's why he wanted his technology hidden away and guarded. HP w motivated by Nemo's caution – paranoia, even. So you've got two completely different schools, Land Institute and Harding-Pencroft, insp by different sides of the same person.'

My head throbs. The alt-tech aspirin seems to be stitching my skull together in the most painful way possible. 'Those are my two choices which Nemo I want to be? The angry one or the paranoid one?'

'No.' Ester jots something down – hopefully not therapy notes. 'Ma Dev fell into that trap. He thought he had to choose. Maybe you don't to. You both have some Dakkar personality traits, sure. But you can de be a different kind of Captain Nemo.'

I stare at Ester, amazed by how obvious she makes it all sound.

'I just want to do the right thing,' I say.

'So does Dev, I bet,' Ester says. 'The difference is, you have the sub have Nemo's resources. You could build an entirely new Harding-Pen you wanted to. I'd like to help.'

'Nemo's resources?' I get the feeling she's not just talking about his fusion engine, or his cav-drive, or his copious reservoir of seaweed sli

Ester checks her watch. 'Hasn't been an hour yet, but I guess you've long enough. Come on. There's one more door I want you to unlock.'

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CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

Every time I think the *Nautilus* can't surprise me any more, I find out I wrong.

On the sub's lowest level, in the back of the main storeroom, crates been moved aside to reveal a large metal vault door like the one that le the subterranean lake in Lincoln Base.

'Rhys and Linzi found it while doing inventory,' Ester says. 'I think know what's inside, but there's only one way to be sure.'

In other words, she needs the magic Nemo hands.

I study the lock. I trust Ester's instincts, but still … I'm hesitant abo opening a door someone took the trouble to hide. If Nemo had any ske in his closet (literal or otherwise), this seems like the kind of closet he' them in.

'*Nautilus*,' I say in Bundeli, 'would it be okay if I opened this door?

All by itself, the lock spins. Bolts click and release. I guess that's a y

I pull the door open. Inside …

Oh.

Normally, I'm not a material girl. *Stuff* doesn't impress me.

But for a moment I forget how to breathe. I relive one of my earliest memories, when Dev, who must've been pretty much a baby himself, l my nostrils, his stronger lungs overwhelming my own, leaving me gas shock.

I can't believe what I'm seeing.

'Nemo's treasury,' Ester says, remarkably calm. 'I thought so.'

Now I understand the old saying *all that glitters is not gold*. Becaus Nemo's treasury room a lot of the glitter comes from silver, diamonds, rubies, pearls and crazy fancy jewellery. The shelves are lined with wo chests, each overflowing with carefully sorted loot. Nemo was apparer obsessed with order. He has all the diamonds grouped together, all the all the pearls sorted by colour and size. Against the far wall is a pallet bricks. There's even a shelf with half a dozen crowns, each of which lo like it might have been ripped from the head of some nineteenth-centu monarch. All in all, the room reminds me of a bizarre supply store.

Excuse me, sir, where can I find sapphires?

Yes, those would be on aisle three, just past the silver-ingot display.

'Wow,' I say, which seems insufficient.

Ester looks around in awe. 'This room was organized by a genius.'

Top sniffs around the treasure, wagging his tail half-heartedly as if t *Well, I guess it's all right, but it ain't doggy treats.*

Ester picks up a shoebox-size chest of white pearls. 'Nemo gave Ha and Pencroft a box like this. It was enough to build the academy.'

'There must be twenty boxes like that in here,' I say.

Ester scans the room, probably running estimates. 'Nemo gathered s it from the merchant vessels he plundered, some from older shipwreck discovered. In *20,000 Leagues*, he boasted that he could pay off the na debt of France and it wouldn't make a dent in his fortune. This room m just *one* of his stashes. Harding family legends say Nemo had supply b hidden all over the world.'

I wonder if this is what Land Institute wanted, too, along with the technology: money. Such a common thing to want, but with this much they could probably build three more *Aronnax*es and topple several wo governments. Given the potential payoff, risking their brand-new sub a their senior class starts to sound like a solid gamble.

Thinking about it in those terms makes me want to take a shower.

My eyes fix on a strange-looking instrument propped in the corner. about the size of a guitar, but with a keyboard instead of strings, alt-tec gears and levers where the fret board should be, even a dial that looks colour wheel, maybe for special visual effects?

'What in the –?' I pick it up gingerly. 'Captain Nemo invented the k

Ester laughs. It's a rare, adorable sound, like a piglet being tickled. S doesn't often find my jokes amusing (which keeps me humble), but

absurdities get her every time. ‘He took his music seriously.’

‘I guess so.’ I study the intricate controls. I remember the way the *N* reacted the first time I played the organ on the bridge. This keytar was important enough to hold in the treasury, so it must have a purpose bey entertainment. I decide to come back later and figure it out. For now, t I can’t shake the image of Captain Nemo dancing through the corridor *Nautilus* with his keytar, jamming to ‘Little Red Corvette’.

Did that song come out during the Victorian era? Close enough.

I look at Ester, still cradling the box of pearls like it’s a litter of kitte

The sight gives me a warm sense of satisfaction. ‘At least something came out of our troubles,’ I tell her. ‘You don’t need your trustees any You can rebuild Harding-Pencroft all on your own.’

Ester stiffens. ‘No, I wasn’t …’ She hastily offers me the box of pea ‘It’s not my treasure. I would never … I would only do that if you deci

‘Ester.’ I push the box gently back to her. ‘I trust you. We’ll figure c details later, but I can’t imagine a world without Harding-Pencroft Aca As Prince Dakkar’s descendant and captain of the *Nautilus*, I ask you t please take this gift. I know you’ll make HP even better than it was. *W* together.’

Her mouth quivers. She blinks back tears. For a moment, I worry I r have misjudged her wishes and given her a burden she didn’t really wa

Then she says, ‘I love you. I’m going to put this under my bunk.’

And off she goes with Top at her heels.

As I stand alone in the treasury, I wonder if Nemo ever worried abo crew walking off with a few hundred million in gold and jewels. I gues What would it have mattered to him if they did? The sea gave him eve he needed.

Yet with all his wealth and advanced tech, he still ended his life bitt defeated. He was so alone he had to trust his legacy to shipwrecked str

He didn’t believe in humanity. He didn’t believe in himself. He trie failed to change the world – and ended up being written off as a fictio character.

I think about Dev aboard the *Aronnax*. I remember him telling me h to destroy HP because it was the only way to take what was rightfully this ship, Nemo’s legacy.

I wish he were here now. I would punch him. Then I would give hin hug. Next I would force him to look at all this wealth and see how poi

was for Nemo. Absolute power can corrupt anyone. Nemo knew that. I
autilus end, all he could do was bury himself with his sub and his riches and h
that maybe some day human nature would improve to the point where
ond could handle his power.
hough, And yet here we are, more than a century and a half later, still fighti
s of the the *Nautilus* like it's a prized toy in the sandbox.

Someone grunts behind me, breaking me out of my thoughts.

I turn to find Jupiter waiting for my attention. He looks past me at th
ns. room full of treasure. Then he signs, *Where did your crew put my muff*
g good *pans?*
more. I have to smile. At least orangutans have their priorities straight.

'Let's go look,' I tell him.

rls. We head off in search of real treasure. We can't use billions in the n
ded –' of the Palau Trench, but we can definitely use Jupiter's blueberry muff
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was for Nemo. Absolute power can corrupt anyone. Nemo knew that. In the end, all he could do was bury himself with his sub and his riches and hope that maybe some day human nature would improve to the point where we could handle his power.

And yet here we are, more than a century and a half later, still fighting over the *Nautilus* like it's a prized toy in the sandbox.

Someone grunts behind me, breaking me out of my thoughts.

I turn to find Jupiter waiting for my attention. He looks past me at the room full of treasure. Then he signs, *Where did your crew put my muffin pans?*

I have to smile. At least orangutans have their priorities straight.

'Let's go look,' I tell him.

We head off in search of real treasure. We can't use billions in the middle of the Palau Trench, but we can definitely use Jupiter's blueberry muffins.



CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

Day and night don’t mean much underwater, but I spend the hours unti
dinnertime checking on my crew around the ship, helping out where I

The *Nautilus* is acting cranky. I suppose she didn’t like being called
antique piece of junk by the crew of a newer submarine, then running
fight by shooting halfway across the Pacific. I soothe her with complin
and promises that we will get her back in fighting shape, if she’ll just l
work without shocking us or spewing gunk in our faces.

I guess she understands at least some of my submarine-whispering.
day’s end, the Cephalopods have restored basic propulsion. The cav-d
will take longer, but that’s fine by me. I’m not anxious for another test
until we’ve figured out the seat-belt situation.

When we reconvene for our evening meal, everyone seems in a bett
mood. At this point, each day we stay alive is a win, but we’re also ma
progress on repairs. Jupiter’s food continues to make our bellies happy
word has got around about Nemo’s treasury.

I left the vault door open so all the crew members could take a look.
made it clear that if anyone wanted to walk away after we’ve finished
they could do so and become an instant billionaire.

So far, there haven’t been any takers. Everyone seems determined t
the *Nautilus* in order, return to Lincoln Base, save our friends and defe
Aronnax. Afterwards (if there *is* an afterwards) we can figure out how
rebuild HP with our newfound shiny pretties. This doesn’t stop the cre
calling one another billionaires, however. Nelinha is now Billionaire
Engineer da Silva, I am Billionaire Captain Dakkar, and Jupiter is the
Billionaire Gourmet Orangutan.

I think Nemo might have been wrong about human nature. There are people in the world. Despite what happened with Dev and Land Institu despite Harding-Pencroft's own failures, this crew is made up of peopl trust.

I go to sleep that night in my ancestor's stateroom, staring at the cor patterned bas-relief on the ceiling. I wonder what the *Nautilus* thinks o new crew. I hope, as we continue to clean her ancient brain, she doesn remembering the downsides of working with humans.

The next day is my fifteenth birthday. Ester and Nelinha bring me a cupcake for breakfast and sing to me quietly, but they understand I dor want any other recognition. We have so much else going on, and so lit celebrate … Also, I do *not* want to spend this day reflecting on how m changed in the past year, or even the past week. And, as for blowing ou candles and making wishes, I'm not sure I could express any of my wi without breaking into tears. Better to just keep moving forward.

We've given ourselves a week to repair the ship, which isn't nearly time, but we also know that every day we spend here is another day ou friends are prisoners of Land Institute.

I wish I could believe the *Aronnax* had left Lincoln Base alone. I'd f relieved if I knew they were following the *Nautilus*, hoping to catch us suspect Lee-Ann was right about Dev taking hostages and waiting to s we would come back. I just have to hope this old submarine still has sc surprises up her torpedo tubes. We have to figure out a way not to cav- ourselves right into a trap. Otherwise, all our tech and all that treasure hold aren't going to do us any good.

The day after my birthday, we finish de-gunking the innards of the *Nautilus.* As near as Nelinha can tell, the cav-drive is back online. The Sharks repair the forward and aft Leyden cannons. They also manage t together two working torpedoes by cannibalizing parts from the others board.

'They would have exploded in the bay if we'd tried to fire them at th *Aronnax*,' Gem assures me. 'So it's a good thing we didn't.'

The next day, Halimah and Jack get the skiff operational and take it a spin. They manage not to crash or drown. Robbie figures out how to Jupiter's *Great British Bake Off* Blu-rays through the LOCUS display galley, so our chef can watch Mary Berry in holographic purple 3-D (v is just as terrifying as it sounds). I discover that Captain Nemo's keyta

be synched with the bridge's pipe organ, so I can play music from any in the ship.

'Or even outside the ship,' Ester guesses. 'That keytar thing looks waterproof. I bet you could broadcast music while you're in the deep.'

Nelinha frowns. 'Why would she want to do that?'

'I don't know,' Ester says. 'Because it's cool?'

That afternoon, I spend most of my time on the pipe organ. I don't p that way. I run through one Bach fugue just because the crew is curiou of them have never heard me play.

When I finish, I realize everyone on the bridge is staring at me.

'That was beautiful,' Virgil says.

From the overhead speaker, Meadow Newman says, 'Engine room. Ana? Keep doing that. Panels lit up down here that we haven't been ab get working before.'

So I play another Bach piece. After that I play 'Imagine' by John Le A few tunes later, I get wild and play my favourite, Adele's 'Someone You'.

The bridge lights brighten. The keyboard seems to warm under my f The notes come more easily, as if the organ is anticipating the tune.

Then the *Nautilus* joins in. She begins to play her own countermeloc The song becomes even richer and sadder. I feel the submarine start to

'Whoa,' says Lee-Ann. 'Depth now forty metres … fifty. Is it suppo be doing this?'

My ears ring. The hull creaks, but I don't stop the song.

I have a feeling that the *Nautilus* and I are really talking for the first She's sharing her grief … Maybe apologizing for what happened to my parents. We've both lost so many people.

When the song finally ends, my face is wet with tears.

At the helm, Halimah exhales. 'We've levelled off at one hundred m Captain, I think the *Nautilus* likes Adele a little too much.'

A shadow falls across the keyboard. I wonder how long Gem has be standing next to me. 'That was amazing, Ana. You keep surprising me

He offers me a linen handkerchief. Where did *that* come from? I wo he always keeps it handy, which seems like a very old-fashioned *Gem* thing to do. Or maybe he just uses it to clean his gun barrels.

A few days ago, if he'd offered me a hankie, I would've laughed at Now, I take it and dab my eyes, grateful that my back is turned to the r

where the bridge crew. ‘Thanks.’

He nods. ‘It’s okay to be emotional.’

I sniffle. Why is he being nice to me? And why is it only making me worse?

‘I –’ I get to my feet shakily, then set the handkerchief across the keyboard. ‘I’ll be in my quarters.’

lan it Ester finds me there an hour later. I suspect she’s allowed me that m
s. Most time to pull myself back together after my emotional-wreckage mini c

Top jumps onto my bed. He knows the drill. When Ana plays sad m the only remedy is dog-cuddling.

‘That must have been hard,’ Ester tells me, picking at her thumb. ‘B
Hey, was important.’

le to I nod glumly, though I’m not sure I understand her meaning. ‘The *N* and I were communicating, I think.’

nnon. ‘Mm.’ Ester crosses to the far side of the stateroom. She presses her
Like against the wall as if checking for hot spots. ‘It was more than talking. *Nautilus* heals better when you play.’

ingers. ‘Heals. Like … physically?’

Ester tilts her head. ‘Maybe that’s the wrong word. But the pipe org
lies. wasn’t just made for show. The music –’

dive. ‘It’s a programming language,’ I realize.

sed to Why didn’t I see that sooner? I’m a Dolphin, specializing in langua
Yet I’ve completely missed the connection between language, music a
Every time I play, I’m teaching the *Nautilus* new cognitive pathways,
time. her operating system based on my input. Dread sinks into my gut like
y bowling ball. ‘Have I messed up?’

Ester considers this question long enough to make me really worrie

‘You’ve changed the *Nautilus*,’ she decides. ‘You’ve heard of impri

netres. ‘Like when a baby duck imprints on its mother,’ I say. ‘They form a attachment.’

en ‘Or when another species of animal attaches to humans,’ she says. ‘
.’ for instance.’

nder if Top thumps his tail. He knows the word *dog*.

sort of ‘You’re saying the *Nautilus* is my baby duck?’ I ask.

‘Or maybe you’re the *Nautilus*’s baby duck,’ Ester muses. ‘Either w
him. you’re connecting to each other. I think that’s good. I guess we’ll find
est of tomorrow.’

‘Tomorrow?’

Ester looks puzzled. ‘Nelinha didn’t tell you? She wants you to go o
e feel the ship and try something with the hull.’

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‘Tomorrow?’

Ester looks puzzled. ‘Nelinha didn’t tell you? She wants you to go outside the ship and try something with the hull.’



CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

‘Leidenfrost,’ Gem says as we’re suiting up.

He actually says it twice. The first time I don’t respond, because I’m obsessing about my most recent nightmare. I was glued to Captain Nem chair while the bridge filled with green slime …

‘Sorry, what?’ I ask.

‘It’s a kind of shielding,’ Gem says. ‘Different than Leyden guns. Leidenfrost would create a near-freezing sheath of water around the hu

He sits on the bench across from me, connecting hoses to his antique suit. On the other side of the interior airlock door, Nelinha raps her knu on the window. ‘Red hose in the red valve, Twain,’ she says over the intercom. ‘We marked them for you. And Leidenfrost shielding wasn’t for combat.’

‘I know, I know.’ Gem rolls his eyes at me. ‘Ever since she became billionaire engineer, she’s impossible.’

‘I can hear you, billionaire gunslinger,’ Nelinha says.

Gem grins. Among the many things I never thought I would see in th Gem and Nelinha joking good-naturedly with each other.

‘Anyway,’ he says, picking up his helmet, ‘Leidenfrost was designe the *Nautilus* could dive in extreme temperatures. Like, she could theor plunge through an active volcanic vent, straight through lava, and suffe damage.’

‘Wow.’ I stare at the exterior door that will lead us into the abyss. ‘*Nautilus*, what kind of adventures did you get up to back in the day?’

The sub does not answer, but I imagine her feeling smug. *Yeah, kid, only knew.*

'If we can get our Leidenfrost shield working,' Gem says, 'it might disperse energy weapons. Obviously, Nemo didn't use it that way. No ships in his time had Leyden cannons. But I have a theory the *Aronnax* using Leidenfrost and that's why it was impervious to Lincoln Base's electrical turrets.'

I remember the fuzzy aura around the enemy sub on our LOCUS dis 'Okay. So how do we get it working?'

'I'll guide you,' Nelinha says over the comm. 'There's a damaged c just past the starboard aft bulkhead. I have a feeling it'll need that spec Nemo touch, which is why we've gotta send you, but otherwise it shou simple fix.'

'If we weren't doing it a hundred metres underwater,' I say.

The *Nautilus* has stubbornly refused to budge from this depth, for re none of us understand. I can't shake the sense that she wants us to be i particular spot, though there is nothing around us on the LOCUS but th yawning canyon of the Palau Trench.

'You'll be fine,' Nelinha says. If I didn't know her so well, I might the nervousness in her voice. 'We've pressure-tested the suits. They're than anything modern navies could design.'

Still, we'll be the first people to use them since the 1800s, at a depth only the best modern technical divers with nitrox tanks should work.

The suit's mesh material doesn't cling like a wetsuit. It also isn't bu a typical drysuit. It's so light and flexible I can't imagine how it will p any thermal protection. Nelinha tells me it's a nemonium weave. The t feels more like a cashmere sweater than metal.

The air tanks are impossibly small and compact, no larger than a sch backpack. Instead of fins, we have boots with squid-inspired jet propul (naturally).

The helmets are the most disconcerting part of the gear. The transpa spheres are made of the same pseudo-glass as the windows on the brid When I put mine on, I can breathe just fine. I have a great range of visi But I feel like my head's in a fishbowl that smells like … well, a fishb

Gem stands. He looks strange without his holsters, like his hips have suddenly got narrower. 'May I?'

if you His voice comes through loud and clear in my stereophonic fishbow
check each other's gear, looking for tears, snags, loose connectors. We
shoulder the toolkits Nelinha gave us. Finally, there's no more reason t
other delay.
: is 'Okay, Nelinha,' I say. 'Flood the airlock.'
It happens in the time it takes Gem to hum one chorus of 'Someone
You', which he seems to do unironically. We stand in the murky green
splays. waiting to see if our gear malfunctions. Better here than once we open
exterior lock and get exposed to the pressure of ten atmospheres.
onduit Nothing leaks. I can breathe normally. The suit feels warm, dry and
ial – so much so that I resent all the hours I spent training in uncomfortabl
uld be a neoprene.
Gem gives me the *okay* sign – the universal diver's signal that mean
guessed it, okay.
asons The moment of truth.
n this '*Nautilus*,' I say. 'I'm going to leave the ship for a while. We need t
ne inspect the hull.'
I half expect her to respond like an overprotective parent. *And what*
miss *will you be home, young lady?*
better I pull the release latch. The exterior door irises open with no problem
I barely feel the pressure equalize: a tightening in the fabric of my su
where soft pop in my ears. I curl my toes, the way Nelinha instructed us, and
boots shoot me into the deep.
lky like 'Hey, wait up!' Gem's voice rings in my helmet.
rovide The sound that escapes my throat is somewhere between a laugh and
exture roller-coaster scream. I've gone diving hundreds of times, but it's never
this exhilarating. I can move effortlessly. There's no breathing apparat
ool stuck in my mouth. I turn and rocket in a different direction, scattering
lsion school of bluefin tuna. 'This is incredible!'
Gem is laughing, too. He jets past on my left, his helmet glowing lik
rent phosphorescent jellyfish. He tucks his knees and somersaults into the d
ge. 'Okay, you two,' Nelinha's voice chides. 'You've got work to do ou
ion. there.'
owl. 'Aw, but, Mom …' Gem says.
e 'Don't start with me, Twain,' she warns, 'or I'll take away your SIG
Sauers. Now, if you'll both please make your way towards the aft of th

We do as she asks, though it's difficult not to just float and admire t
Nautilus.

She's breathtaking from the outside: elegant and stately with her fril
barbs and vine-like wiring. Her nemonium hull catches the one percen
sunlight able to filter down to this depth, turning her a dim purple colo
matches her great domed eyes. Unlike the hatchet-shaped *Aronnax*, the
Nautilus looks like she belongs here – a gentle giant, a queen of the de
wonder if that strange sheath along her belly really does scoop up krill
the mouth of a blue whale to keep her fed.

We find the damaged conduit with no problem. As near as we can fi
the *Nautilus* must have been lying against a rock at that spot while she
the bottom of the lake. Her self-healing hull wasn't able to do its job, s
the last 150 years she developed a kind of bedsore. I apply some thick
paste to the area – a concoction the Cephalopods and Orcas came up w
together – while Gem runs a new section of wiring to bypass the break

'I am so sorry,' I tell the *Nautilus*. I don't know if she can feel pain
way people do, but the longer I spend with the submarine, the worse I
her, having spent so much time alone, wounded, neglected. If humans
woken me up after all those years, I probably would have lashed out, t

When we're done with the repair, we float back to what we hope is
distance, about twenty metres.

'Okay, Nelinha,' I say. 'You want to give it a try?'

'We're going to run two tests,' she tells me. 'First, we're going to el
the hull. Then, if it goes okay, we'll try the Leidenfrost shield. Ready?

The entire ship lights up like a carnival. The hull glows in a thousan
different places – brilliant white, blue and gold spots adding to the pur
Search beams arc through the water fore and aft, top and bottom.

One sweeps right across my face, momentarily blinding me.

'Gah!' I yelp. 'Nelinha, is that supposed to be happening?'

'No!' she says. 'Hang on … I don't … Bridge, did somebody hit the
button? Are we having a grand opening nobody told me about? Electri
Not floodlights!'

Next to me, Gem whistles appreciatively. 'It is kind of beautiful.'

But something doesn't feel right. This much brilliance in the dark …
is *Nautilus* doing?

'Guys,' I say over the comm. 'I really think you should kill those lig

‘We’re trying to!’ Cooper Dunne says from the bridge. ‘I don’t get i
didn’t even –’

The connection breaks into a garble of static and voices yelling at or

‘Contact on LOCUS!’ Cooper yells.

Hairs rise on the back of my neck. ‘Where? A ship?’

‘No, too big – Ana, Gem, you need to –’ Cooper’s voice becomes a
‘Below!’

I look down and see a gargantuan shadow rising from the depths, un
like the wings of death.

‘We’re trying to!’ Cooper Dunne says from the bridge. ‘I don’t get it. We didn’t even –’

The connection breaks into a garble of static and voices yelling at once.

‘Contact on LOCUS!’ Cooper yells.

Hairs rise on the back of my neck. ‘Where? A ship?’

‘No, too big – Ana, Gem, you need to –’ Cooper’s voice becomes a shriek. ‘Below!’

I look down and see a gargantuan shadow rising from the depths, unfolding like the wings of death.



CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

Gem tackles me and jets me out of the way, but the creature isn't interes
us.

Eight tentacles the size of bridge cables wrap themselves around the
Nautilus.

The submarine tilts aft. My helmet's comm fills with the crew's scre
As the monster's head emerges from the dark – I'm not going to lie – t
interior of my nice, warm nemonium dive suit gets wet for the first tim
pee myself in terror.

I have been in the water with great white sharks and killer whales. I'
seen big, dangerous sea animals up close, and I've never panicked. Bu
thing in front of us should not exist. It's a giant Pacific octopus, or clos
related to one, except ten times larger than the biggest specimen I've e
heard of. Its full tentacle span must be fifty metres, half the length of tl
Nautilus. It must weigh close to a ton.

I am paralysed by the thought of what those powerful arms could do
ship. At the same time, I am awestruck by the octopus's beauty.

Its bulbous head makes it look like a supervillain with an overdevelo
brain. Its dark eyes are alert and curious. When it breathes, the siphons
sides of its face plume to the size of jumbo jet engines. Each tentacle r
with white-ringed suckers. Its skin is perfectly textured for blending in
rocks and coral, though I can't imagine any coral reef big enough to hi
leviathan. In the dark water, it appears a muddy brown, but, where the
searchlights hit it, the octopus's hue turns a brilliant red. It appears to b
mottling, too, as if trying to camouflage itself with the multicoloured g
the *Nautilus*.

At last, my brain unfreezes. '*Nautilus*, status!'

'Octopus!' Cooper's voice crackles through the static. 'On the ship!

If we live through this experience, I will have to rename him Acting Captain Obvious.

Nelinha breaks in. 'It's squeezing us. Hull integrity … I don't know

'Electricity!' Gem yells. 'That story about the giant squid!'

I know the one he means. In *20,000 Leagues*, the *Nautilus* gave a cr squid some shock therapy to get it off the ship. Something about that a always seemed off to me, but before I can say anything Cooper gives t order: 'Electrify the hull!'

The sub's grand-opening lights go dark. A moment later, green tend lightning flash through the deep. They dance across the octopus's skin, illuminating its membranes and backlighting its eyes. I expect the crea loosen its grip. That *had* to hurt. Instead, it wraps its arms even tighter the *Nautilus*. I can't see its beak, but I imagine it snapping, looking for purchase on the side of the hull.

'Gah!' Nelinha shouts. 'Get off us, you creep!'

'Cooper, try another charge!' Gem says. 'More power –!'

'No, wait!' My mental gears start to spin. 'Cooper, belay that order!

Gem's face is ghostly purple in his gumball-machine helmet. 'You h better idea?'

His tone isn't sarcastic. He genuinely *wants* a better idea.

'It likes the electricity,' I say, silently cursing my own stupidity.

'SHE'S RIGHT,' Ester joins the conversation at maximum volume. 'Octopuses communicate with electrical currents. That probably felt *g* it. To *him*.'

Him?

Oh … right. Now I see that one of the octopus's arms doesn't have s all the way to the tip. Instead, it's tapered with flat, dark circular desig creature's reproductive arm.

'He's not attacking,' I realize. 'He's being affectionate.'

'EEEEWWWW!' someone shrieks on board.

'Nelinha!' I call. 'We need to tell Romeo to respect our personal spa That Leidenfrost shielding – give it one strong blast.'

'But –' Her voice breaks. 'Oh, I see.'

'Right,' I say. 'Romeo needs a cold shower.'

A moment later, white jets of aerated water erupt from the prow, she
’ the *Nautilus* and crashing into the octopus’s tentacles like an avalanche
Romeo shudders. His bulbous head pulses, probably from serious br
freeze.
if –’ ‘Once more!’ I say.
Another blast, and Romeo lets go of the ship. He lurches away, spev
anky cloud of ink so vast that it engulfs everything. I can’t see Gem, or the
ccount *Nautilus*, or the octopus. The only sound in my helmet is my own ragg
he breathing.
‘Cooper?’ I call. ‘Anyone?’
rils of Static.
, ‘We’re here,’ Cooper says at last. ‘We’re okay. That was intense.’
ture to ‘Is the octopus gone?’ Gem asks.
around ‘Uh …’ Cooper hesitates, perhaps checking his LOCUS displays.
‘Actually, guys …?’
Before he can finish, the ink cloud dissipates and gives me my answ
Romeo has not left. He is, in fact, floating right in front of me, his gian
reflecting my entire form like a full-length mirror.
’ Maybe it’s my imagination, but his gaze seems hurt, offended, as if
ıave a thinking, *Why did you do that to me?*
‘Hey, Ana?’ Gem’s voice sounds unusually high. ‘How ’bout we do
make any sudden moves?’
I try to stay calm. This is surprisingly hard to do with a one-ton octo
my face. If Romeo wanted to kill me, though, I would already be dead.
ood to just keeps looking at me as if waiting for something. I consider the wa
showed up as soon as the *Nautilus* put on her light show. I think about
colours, and lights, and the electrical impulses octopuses use to commu
suckers An idea comes to me – probably the worst one I’ve ever had. ‘Ester,
ns – theyou hear me?’
‘I’M HERE,’ she says in my helmet. ‘Ana, that octopus is really clo
you.’
‘I noticed. How would you feel about suiting up and joining us?’
ace. ‘Is that a joke?’ Ester asks. ‘I have trouble telling with your jokes.’
‘No,’ I assure her. ‘I need my animal specialist. And bring the keyta
you? I think I understand why the *Nautilus* brought us here.’

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CHAPTER FIFTY

As we wait, I try to keep Romeo engaged (probably a bad choice of wo
by showing him sign language. I don't expect him to understand, but
octopuses are intelligent and highly curious. I hope I can at least give h
something to think about besides making another pass at our ship.

Meanwhile, I'm also talking on the comm, explaining my idea to the
– that maybe, just maybe, our submarine *brought* us here so we could
Romeo.

Gem is the only one whose face I can see. He does not look convinc
'It's a stretch, Ana. How could the *Nautilus* know Romeo would be he
How long would an octopus this size live, anyway?'

It's a good question. From what I remember about giant octopuses,
only live a few years. Then again, no octopus this large has ever been
discovered.

'I don't know,' I admit. 'Romeo could be ancient, or a descendant o
octopuses who have always lived here … At any rate, I don't think the
Nautilus would have brought us here just to get us killed. I think, in he
way, she's trying to help us.'

Romeo gives me no indication of how he's feeling. He could crush
easily, or chop me in half with his giant beak, but I try not to think abo
I still have his full attention. I want to keep it that way.

A-N-A, I sign for the tenth time. *I am Ana.*

I show him the name sign I've created for *Romeo*: the letter *R*, palm
fingers crossed – a sign that could easily be made with two tentacles if
ever chooses to use it in a social situation with his monstrous octopus

Gem checks the antique displays on his wrist control. ‘We have twe
minutes of air left, if I’m reading this gauge correctly.’

That’s not great news. At this depth, using unfamiliar equipment, w
easily find twenty minutes of air turning into ten, or five, or none, with
warning. We should be heading for the airlock right now, but I have a
more work to do if I’m going to test my theory, plus there’s this giant
staring me down.

At last, the ship’s exterior lock irises open. Ester jets into the void w
keytar, like she’s about to take the strangest rock solo in history. She n
have put unequal pressure in her boots, because she ends up spinning h
over heels.

‘I HATE THIS,’ she announces.

‘Relax your feet,’ Gem advises. ‘Okay … now, left and right boots a
same time, one quick burst.’

She follows Gem’s directions. Slowly, awkwardly, she lurches towa
Her face looks even more shocked than usual, floating in its purple gla
fishbowl.

‘Oh, wow,’ she says. ‘Romeo’s big. He’s really pretty.’

I’m thankful she likes animals, even huge scary ones. We don’t nee
more bladder accidents.

Ester floats closer and hands me the keytar. ‘Do you think I can touc
him?’ she asks.

‘Well, I mean …’

She puts her hand gently on Romeo’s forehead. His skin quivers anc
but his muscles seem to relax.

‘Okay.’ I shoulder the keytar. ‘Ester, I need you to watch Romeo’s
responses. If I do something wrong, help me change course.’

‘What if things go *really* wrong?’ Gem asks.

His tone warns me how on edge he is. He has no weapons (thankfull
he looks ready to drag me back to the ship or punch the octopus in the
give me time to escape.

‘It’ll work,’ I say.

I never realized how much of leadership is learning to sound confide
when you’re actually terrified.

In truth, I have no idea whether my plan will work. I don’t know if I
about to make a breakthrough in octopus–human communication or in
a one-ton lovesick cephalopod that could snap me like a twig.

‘*Nautilus*, I need your help,’ I say in Bundeli. ‘I think you brought u to meet your … your friend. If that’s the case, help me talk to him.’

As I’m explaining to the *Nautilus* what I want to ask Romeo, I realiz many things could go wrong. Just translating from one language to anc hard enough. I’m trying to talk to a Victorian-era AI in a rare Indo-Ary dialect, hoping she can help me accurately relay a message to a creatur another species. But I have to try. I’m a Dolphin. I believe that communication can solve any problem if the parties have the will and t intelligence to learn to understand each other.

I turn on the keyboard. I test a few notes. As Ester suspected, the instrument works just fine underwater. Over my comm, I can hear the resonating throughout the ship. I can also feel the vibrations rippling outwards from the hull, as if the *Nautilus* is acting as one massive amp

I turn the keytar’s colour wheel. Romeo seems to find this fascinatir lights reflect in his great dark eye like Christmas decorations through a streaked window.

I hold a C chord. The notes synchronize with the ship’s lights, turnir dark water an intense shade of indigo. Romeo’s colouration begins to c matching the blue. The sound waves are strong enough to rattle the sea my helmet.

‘Is it working?’ Gem asks.

‘Hold on,’ I tell him. ‘I’m still saying hello.’

I play a verse of Adele, just to see how it goes. The *Nautilus* puts on light show. Romeo watches my hands on the keyboard. His skin ripple different colours, as if he’s trying to absorb a new spectrum of informa

‘I think he likes puzzles,’ Ester decides. ‘Try the Bach, something intricate.’

Organ Sonata Number 4 is about as intricate as I can get without tyi fingers in knots. I turn the colour wheel, setting it to brighter hues that normally wouldn’t be visible this deep, then I start to play. The *Nautilu* obliges with bursts of red and yellow, more like Romeo’s natural pigmentation. About halfway through the song, the *Nautilus* starts add harmonic riffs.

Romeo responds with his own palette of colours. His enormous hea pulses. Maybe I’m crazy, but I think the *Nautilus* is using my song to s message.

I hope that message is not *Hi, buddy! I brought you lunch!*

‘Ana,’ Gem says urgently, ‘we’re almost out of air.’

I end the song. The ship’s lights fade to a gentle purple glow.

I float eye to eye with the octopus. I can feel my air supply thinning; starting to smell like hot metal.

At last, Romeo’s tentacles undulate. His entire boneless mass compr into a flattened lozenge shape, much smaller than should be possible fo creature his size. But octopuses can do such things. They are amazing creatures.

I laugh. My message has been received.

‘Okay,’ I tell Ester and Gem. ‘Let’s get back on board.’

As we jet to the ship, Romeo returns to his regular form. He floats th apparently content just to be near the *Nautilus*, though he still looks a b lovelorn.

The airlock drains quickly. That’s good, since I’m sucking the last molecules of oxygen from my helmet. Thankfully, the nemonium suits self-regulating, so we won’t have to spend hours decompressing.

I’m just removing my helmet when Nelinha opens the interior door. marches in, Top right behind her. The dog sniffs my suit, letting me kn smell like pee. Nelinha glares at me angrily. ‘Are you crazy, risking yo like that?’

I give her a big wet hug.

‘I love cephalopods,’ I tell her. ‘You, the rest of your team and the g one outside. You’re all wonderful.’

Nelinha scowls at Gem. ‘Does she have nitrogen narcosis? Did you my Ana?’

‘I don’t think so,’ Gem says. ‘She was like that when I found her.’

‘That octopus is amazing,’ Ester says.

Top barks.

‘Not as amazing as you,’ Ester assures the dog.

‘Get the crew ready,’ I tell Nelinha. ‘I’ll explain my plan. Then we’r going to war.’

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CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE

The best lesson I ever got in military-tactics class wasn't even from a r
officer. It was an army saying attributed to Dwight D. Eisenhower, Su
Allied Commander during World War II: *Plans are worthless, but pla*
is everything.

That's how I feel, talking to my crew. We go over every possible sc
I tell them what I *think* Dev will do. We come up with Plans A, B and
knowing we'll probably throw all of them out in the heat of combat. B
least the discussion helps us wrap our minds around the challenges we
facing. They are considerable.

Finally, I explain my ace-in-the-hole strategy, or more specifically
octopus-in-the-hole. After a full week of crazy stuff, the idea takes us t
whole new level of bonkers.

But the crew agrees that it's worth a try. If we can do it without brea
into a million pieces, all the better.

Three hours later, I'm on the bridge. All stations are manned. We've
repaired our systems as best we can without dock facilities. We've got
working dynamic camouflage, electrifiable hull plating, Leidenfrost sh
and some really cool mood lighting. The fore and aft Leyden cannons
operational, along with two somewhat questionable torpedoes.

Best of all, our special cargo has been loaded into the sheath along t
ship's belly.

Ester and Robbie return to the bridge after a visual inspection, both
dive suits still dripping wet.

Robbie looks shell-shocked. 'That was the most disturbing thing I'v
seen.'

‘You mean amazing,’ Ester says.

I can’t believe it actually worked. I find myself grinning.

‘Don’t celebrate yet,’ Gem warns. ‘The extra weight may make it impossible for us to use the cav-drive.’

‘I heard that,’ Nelinha says from the engine room. ‘Don’t bad-mouth engines, Spider-Man. They’ll do just fine. Captain, waiting on your or

I take my chair. I strap myself in with a newly installed alt-tech modification the Cephalopods call a ‘seat belt’ (patent pending).

I open ship-wide communications. ‘All hands, this is the captain.’ A they don’t know me. ‘We’ve worked hard for this moment. You all kn your jobs. We can do this. Assuming our course is plotted correctly –’

‘It is,’ Halimah assures me.

‘Our cavitation shot will be two hours forty-six minutes, exit point-t kilometres south-southeast of Lincoln Base. Brace for cav-drive. Stand battle stations. We have to expect the *Aronnax* will see us when we arr

‘They will,’ Gem mutters. ‘The cav-drive will make us light up like explosion.’

‘Let’s not talk about explosions,’ I say. ‘I’ll need quick targeting res when we arrive, Mr Twain. Watch that LOCUS.’

He gives me a faint smile, then puts one fist on his chest and bows s ‘Aye, Captain.’ He turns back to his console.

Not long ago, I would have assumed Gem was making fun of me. N realize he’s offering me a genuine show of respect and deference. The the bridge crew smiles in turn and looks to me for orders. It’s time to g work.

I square my shoulders. ‘Helm,’ I say, ‘set course.’

‘Course set, aye,’ says Halimah.

‘Engine room.’ I take a deep breath. ‘Punch to cav-drive.’

FOOOM!

This time I remain conscious, so I can appreciate the display. Torren air sheet over the prow, whiting out the windows like a blizzard. The e force pushes me into my seat. The lights dim. The hull creaks and shiv the ship stays together.

‘Engine room, status,’ I say, gritting my teeth. ‘Any injuries?’

‘Status nominal,’ Nelinha says. ‘No injuries down here. Told you sh could handle it.’

The wait that follows is the hardest part. Almost three hours at heav force is not fun. I feel like I have a walrus sitting on my chest. We can around or do much of anything except watch our control panels. It doe help that LOCUS displays don't work during a cav-shot, so we're esse blind.

'Stay with me,' I whisper to the *Nautilus*. 'We're going to show our enemies what you can do.'

I have to believe the *Nautilus* understands. She's attuned to my voic She's ready to fight. I just hope she has enough tricks in her arsenal to against a much newer sub. We're going to need every advantage we ca

After a long while, the scent of oatmeal-raisin cookies wafts from th kitchen. How is Jupiter making cookies right now? And why can't I ha one?

I make a mental note that, in the future, cookies will be distributed *b* punching to cav-drive. Then I start thinking about ways to install drink holders for glasses of milk …

Finally, Halimah gives me the news I've been waiting for: 'Five mi termination.'

'Can we please not call it that?' Ester asks. She's sitting at the back bridge next to Top, who wears a special harness in his doggy bed.

'Destination?' Lee-Ann suggests.

'Good,' Ester says. 'Destinations are good.'

Top sighs heavily. He seems to agree that a destination would be gr because cav-drive is worse than being stuck in a kennel.

I open the comm. 'All hands, battle stations.'

As if I need to tell them that. They've been stuck at their battle stati hours. I just hope we don't have an immediate line for the bathrooms a as we drop out of cav-drive.

'One minute to – uh, destination,' Halimah says.

I drum my fingers against the armrest controls. I imagine us oversho our goal and slamming into the Hawaiian coast like an alt-tech bug aga windshield.

'Five, four …' Halimah grips her controls. 'One.'

The blizzard of air disappears from the windows, and I'm looking at ocean.

The LOCUS holospheres flicker to life.

'Weapons online,' Gem says. 'Scanning for targets.'

‘Evasive course,’ I say. ‘Activate camouflage. Thirty degrees starbo
Make depth –’

The ship shudders as if we’ve passed over a speed bump.

‘That was our payload deploying.’ Lee-Ann sounds relieved.

‘Is the payload okay?’ Ester asks.

I understand her concern. That was a long time at a lot of Gs, but I c
the large blip on Lee-Ann’s LOCUS, descending at a diagonal under h
power. I have to hope our large hitch-hiker isn’t carsick now as well as
lovesick.

If we’re lucky, the *Aronnax* will be moored in the lagoon or even th
cavern. That will give us time to get away from our payload and the ex
point of our cav-shot – using camouflage to obscure our position.

If we’re unlucky …

‘Contact!’ yells Virgil. ‘One kilometre, twelve o’clock, depth ten m
It’s the *Aronnax*. They’re right between us and Lincoln Base.’

I curse. I didn’t really expect Dev to let his guard down, even after a
Still, the sight of that awful purple arrowhead on Gem’s tactical displa
makes me hesitate a millisecond too long. The second smaller blip con
of nowhere – right in front of our prow.

‘Torpedo in the water!’ Gem shouts.

I start to yell, ‘Leidenfrost –!’

The *Nautilus* lurches forward, almost jolting my head from my neck

‘Evasive course,’ I say. ‘Activate camouflage. Thirty degrees starboard. Make depth –’

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I understand her concern. That was a long time at a lot of Gs, but I can see the large blip on Lee-Ann’s LOCUS, descending at a diagonal under his own power. I have to hope our large hitch-hiker isn’t carsick now as well as lovesick.

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CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO

‘Power is down!’ Halimah yells. ‘EMP blast!’

I blink spots from my eyes. The bridge is dark.

Dev’s voice comes over our loudspeaker: ‘Welcome back, *Nautilus*. down and prepare to be boarded.’

I hate how smug he sounds. He’s been waiting to pull exactly this tr disable us, then take us without a fight. The fact that I anticipated the s doesn’t make it any better. I was hoping to have a few more seconds fo evasive manoeuvres. Now I have to pray for Plan C to work.

‘Come on, *Nautilus*,’ I murmur. ‘Engine room, how is Plan C?’

‘Little busy down here, Captain!’ Nelinha says. ‘I managed to hit th switch before impact. Reactor is down, but hopefully our circuits aren’ If we can just – Aha!’

The engines hum. The bridge lights flicker back to life. LOCUS sph reform over the control consoles.

‘Yes, querida!’ Nelinha laughs. ‘We have auxiliary power! Eat coal, *Aronnax*!’

The bridge crew whoops and hollers. Plan C is for *coal*. Our Victori backup generator won’t give us nearly as much power as cold fusion, b better than nothing.

‘Da Silva,’ I say, ‘you are one brilliant Cephalopod!’

‘Well, I’m a Cephalopod, so *brilliant* is redundant, but thanks, Capt Now, if you’ll excuse me, we have coal to shovel!’

In the background, Robbie Barr sneezes. ‘I’m the one shovelling, an think I’m allergic!’

Gem's hands fly across his controls. 'Captain, *Aronnax* is stationary one klick dead ahead. But I have secondary contact – a small submersi Boarding party, probably. Five hundred metres and closing.'

'As expected,' I say. 'Let's send them a message. Make ready torpe one.'

'Torpedo one ready.'

'Target the *Aronnax* amidships. Fire!'

Our hull shudders as the antique missile speeds into the deep.

'Helm, hard to port, ahead full!' I grip my armrests as the ship tilts. make depth thirty metres!'

The *Nautilus* seems to execute my commands before Lee-Ann and Halimah even touch their controls. We plunge and veer towards Linco Base, keeping the enemy skiff between us and the *Aronnax*. On Gem's LOCUS, our torpedo explodes off the *Aronnax*'s port side in a beautifu purple starburst.

'They weren't expecting that!' Virgil says. 'I'm getting enemy chatt the comm.'

He puts it on loudspeaker: Dev shouting orders, six or seven other v replying all at once. I hear enough to understand that Dev is on the ski demanding status reports from the *Aronnax*'s bridge. Then someone o end cuts the transmission.

I allow myself a grim smile. Dev got overconfident. He figured he w just putter over on his skiff and take command of our dead ship. Now h caught between the *Aronnax* and us, and we're very much alive.

I love their confusion, but I know it won't last.

'Make ready torpedo two.'

'That's our last one,' Gem reminds me.

'Yes, but they don't know that. Helm, thirty degrees port, full ahead that skiff between us and the *Aronnax*.'

'Trying, Captain,' Halimah says. 'They're taking evasive action.'

'The skiff is within cannon range,' Gem offers.

'No.' As much as I hate my brother right now, I don't relish the idea possibly cooking him alive in a tin can. 'Stay focused on the *Aronnax*. can target their propulsion –'

A *CLUNK* echoes through the corridors. The bridge lights suddenly

'Hey, Captain,' Nelinha breaks in. 'We're stressing the old choo-ch engine. Maybe take it easy on the fancy manoeuvres?'

‘Just a little longer,’ I tell her, hoping it’s true.

Our octopus-in-the-hole gamble has not paid off yet. Romeo is nowh be seen. I’m disappointed, but not surprised. I knew I was playing with I didn’t understand.

On Halimah’s LOCUS, the enemy skiff is pulling away from us. Th *Aronnax* turns her prow in our direction, trying to keep us in her sights seems to be moving sluggishly – or maybe that’s just my wishful think

‘Captain, torpedo in the water!’ Gem yells.

‘Fire second tube! Rig for depth charge!’

The floor shudders as our last working missile leaves the tube. This out of the bridge windows, I can actually see the white wake line cuttir through the blue. I hold my breath. I watch Gem’s LOCUS as two purp blips – our torpedo and theirs – hurtle towards each other. I don’t need LOCUS to tell me when they collide. The explosion rolls the *Nautilus* starboard side, her hull groaning like she’s got intestinal distress. Only newfangled seat belt keeps me from flying into the pipe organ.

Gem glances back, his eyes wide. ‘That was a seismic charge. If it h us …’

He doesn’t need to spell it out. Somebody on the bridge of the *Aron* getting angry – or possibly panicked. With or without Dev’s permissio are shooting to kill.

I make a fist. This time, the military maxim that comes to mind isn’t Eisenhower – it’s from the Chinese general Sun Tzu: *Appear weak wh are strong, and strong when you are weak.*

‘Helm, turn us about,’ I say. ‘Take us directly towards the *Aronnax*.

Halimah and Lee-Ann both look at me like maybe they misheard.

‘Captain –’ Halimah stops herself, apparently tamping down her misgivings. ‘Aye, Captain. Bringing us about.’

The ship groans louder as we level off and turn.

‘Engine room,’ Nelinha says. ‘Captain, about that stress on the choo –’

‘I know, Nelinha,’ I say. ‘Just keep her together a little longer, pleas Weapons, power up the forward Leyden cannon. Stand by for Leidenfr shielding. Comm, can you open a channel to the *Aronnax* and its skiff?

‘Aye, Captain,’ Virgil says. ‘Channel open.’

I press my hand against the armrest’s control sphere, as if it can reas me that I do in fact have Nemo’s DNA. This is the first time I’ve spok

Dev since his betrayal. It's the first time I've announced myself to our enemies. I can't have my voice trembling.

'*Aronnax*,' I say. 'This is Captain Ana Dakkar of the *Nautilus*. Stand or you will be destroyed.'

Silence.

The hardest thing about making a stupid bluff is reminding yourself your opponent doesn't *know* it's a stupid bluff. The *Aronnax* has seen recover from an EMP blast. They've seen us fire two torpedoes. They know if we have any more. They won't know what other capabilities might have.

I also have to assume they took some damage from our first shot. I expect them to surrender. Dev would never do that. But he might stall time, giving his skiff a chance to return to the *Aronnax*. Until our cold-reactor is back online, I'll take all the time I can get.

When Dev speaks, he sounds ready to snap. 'Nice try, sis. But right I'm the only one over here trying to keep you alive. The next shot won cripple. It'll send you all to the bottom. *Nautilus* crew, you know who I'm the senior Dakkar family member. That ship belongs to me. *Stand*

The bridge crew looks to me.

'Gearr an líne,' I tell Virgil. *Cut the line.*

Gem turns. 'They're opening forward tubes. Four of them.'

My heart sinks into my gut. A spread of four torpedoes at this range

'Leidenfrost shields,' I order. 'Fire forward Leyden cannon. Helm, e manoeuvres –'

But it's too much to ask of the old choo-choo engine. A *CLANG* ech through the ship like we've broken a crankshaft. The LOCUS displays like candle flames in a breeze.

'Helm unresponsive!' Halimah says.

'Leidenfrost inoperative!' Gem adds.

'NO!' Nelinha comes on the comm, sharing a few choice curses in Portuguese. 'I told you, Ana! I need more time!'

'We need more power!' I yell back.

But we don't have either.

On Gem's display, the purple triangle of the *Aronnax* looms closer. skiff hovers a few hundred metres off our port side, waiting to loot the carcass of our ship. Then a string of four smaller blips appears from th *Aronnax*'s prow.

We are about to be dead in the water. Literally.

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We are about to be dead in the water. Literally.



CHAPTER FIFTY-THREE

I have one last desperation play. I slam my hand against the armrest co and yell, '*Nautilus*, emergency dive! Forward vents!'

The ship must hear the urgency in my voice. With her final gasp of powered energy, she jettisons ballast and spews aerated water over the whiting out the windows.

An emergency descent is one thing submarines do very well. Rather giving up and collapsing, it doesn't take much energy. We sink like a r

On Gem's LOCUS, the *Aronnax*'s four torpedoes sail straight over heads – their guidance systems confused by the cloud of air and ballas

I start to say, 'Rig for –' when the chain explosion detonates a hundr metres beyond our stern.

I black out from the shock wave.

When my senses start working again, the bridge is dark except for a electrical fire at Virgil's comm station. The LOCUS displays are dead. acrid haze hangs in the air. Top is barking indignantly, still restrained i doggy bed. Ester stumbles around, checking the bridge crew for injurie Virgil sits dazed on the floor, his seat belt broken, a wisp of smoke cur from his hair. Gem has a trickle of blood glistening on the side of his f

'All weapons offline,' Gem says. 'No shielding.'

'No helm control,' says Halimah.

'Depth forty-two metres,' Lee-Ann reports. 'I've only got analogue readings, but the *Aronnax* … Oh.' Her voice shrinks. 'There she is.'

She's not looking at her controls. She's looking out of the windows.

For the first time, I see the enemy sub in person.

About fifty metres away through the clear blue water, the *Aronnax* l
over us. She appears smaller than the *Nautilus*, though much more sini
black triangle of death with zero sonar profile. Disappointingly, I see n
damage on her hull from our torpedo. I doubt we look as intact or dang
to them.

'Comm, can you pick up anything?' I ask. Then I remember Virgil i
the floor and his station is on fire.

The *Nautilus* responds to my request instead. The loudspeaker crack
Garbled voices come over the line – Dev yelling from the skiff; a youn
woman's voice yelling back from the *Aronnax*'s bridge. Apparently, D
miffed about her decision to fire a full complement of torpedoes at nea
point-blank range. His prize could've been destroyed. *He* could have b
destroyed.

My mouth tastes like the bottom of a barbecue pit. Dev isn't worriec
me or any of the other lives on the *Nautilus*. He really *is* someone I do
know.

'Engine room,' I say. 'Nelinha, status?'

No answer. I can't even be sure the engine room is still in one piece.

Over the comm, Dev snaps at his comrade on the *Aronnax*'s bridge.
'Boarding party on our approach again. Now back off, Karen!'

Karen's exasperated sigh could ignite kindling. 'If the *Nautilus* tries
more tricks, I will blast her to pieces, whether or not you're on board!'

My bridge crew looks at me with a mix of desperation and hope. I n
have another idea, another ace to play. Except I don't.

My heart compresses into a lump of nemonium. 'Prepare for boardi
Issue Leyden guns to any of the crew still willing and able to fight. We
have to –' I gaze out of the window – 'wait.'

'Wait?' Ester asks, confused.

I fumble to unlatch my seat belt. I run to the giant bug's-eye dome t
front-row view as our payload returns from the deep.

Why he chose this exact moment to emerge, I don't know, but the w
lovesick giant octopuses are mysterious. Romeo's enormous tentacles
around the *Aronnax*, pulling her into an embrace. Our comm fills with
screams from the enemy sub. I imagine her entire crew tumbling sidew
into the starboard walls.

Romeo's bulbous head pulses with excitement as he shows his new
some affection. *I've heard all about you*, he seems to be thinking. *You*

hug.

At the same time, as if the *Nautilus* has a sense of humour, our cold reactor decides to come back online. The purple bridge lights glow. LC displays flicker to life.

Nelinha's voice says, 'Sorry, Captain. Still not at full power, but …' falters, probably checking her external displays. 'VIXE MARIA what YES, BABY! That's my cephalopod!'

Cheers echo through the corridors of the *Nautilus*. The bridge crew round me to watch as Romeo drags the *Aronnax* down.

'I bet they'll try electrifying their hull,' Gem says, 'right about now.'

The *Aronnax* does not disappoint. Green lightning dances across the putting the glow of romance in Romeo's eyes. Our octopus friend sque even tighter.

'*Nautilus*,' I say, 'open a channel?'

She responds with a cheerful triangle *ding*. She's clearly pleased wit herself.

'*Aronnax*, this is Ana Dakkar,' I announce. 'You need to abandon sh immediately.'

'Ana!' Dev shrieks. 'What is that? What have you –?'

I feel the implosion in my gut. Romeo snaps the *Aronnax* like ginge Fire and sea churn together. Giant silvery air bubbles, some with peopl inside, billow towards the surface. Romeo has broken the submarine's

My crew hoots and hollers, but I don't feel like celebrating. We hav won anything if we take more lives.

'Ester,' I say. 'Gather the Orcas. Suit up and get out there for rescue operations. See if you can get Romeo to stand down.'

She nods. 'I can do that.'

'They're Land Institute,' Lee-Ann points out. 'The people who dest our entire school.'

'Yes,' I agree. 'And we're going to save them because we're *not* La Institute. Lee-Ann, go with them to help.'

She gulps. 'Aye, Captain.'

On their way out, they get Virgil to his feet and escort him from the Halimah and Gem return to their stations.

'Captain,' Halimah says, 'the enemy skiff has veered off.'

'Picking up survivors?'

‘No …’ Halimah frowns. ‘They’re heading for the mouth of the underwater tunnel.’

I curse. I’ve been so focused on the *Aronnax*, I’d forgotten about Li Base. I’d hoped that watching a monster octopus crush his ship would Dev into submission, but he’s as stubborn as ever. He hasn’t *completel* changed.

Knowing the way he thinks, I imagine Ophelia, Luca, Tia, Franklin Hewett are still being held prisoner on the island. Dev is racing to take of his hostages personally so he can use their lives as leverage.

I check Gem’s readout. ‘Can we disable them –?’

‘Cannons are still offline,’ Gem says. ‘Besides, it’s too late.’

The purple blip of the skiff disappears into the tunnel.

‘Our people will be guarded,’ Halimah warns. ‘When Dev arrives, h in for a stand-off.’

‘Which is why we’ll attack now,’ I decide, ‘before he has time to re

Gem frowns. ‘Ana, the *Nautilus* is in no condition –’

‘The *Nautilus* stays here.’ I put my hand on the console and continu Bundeli. ‘*Nautilus*, I’ve got to try to save our people. If anything happ me, protect your crew. They’re your family now, whether they are Dak not.’

Halimah raises an eyebrow. Aside from me, she’s the Dolphin on bo who’s most fluent in South Asian languages, so she understands Bund well. ‘You think the *Nautilus* will listen to us?’

‘Absolutely.’ I hope I sound more confident than I feel. ‘Halimah, y have the bridge. Gem, you and I are taking the skiff. We’re going after We’re going to end this. Get all the guns you can carry.’

Gem’s smile makes me glad he’s on my side. ‘I thought you’d neve

bridge.

‘No …’ Halimah frowns. ‘They’re heading for the mouth of the underwater tunnel.’

I curse. I’ve been so focused on the *Aronnax*, I’d forgotten about Lincoln Base. I’d hoped that watching a monster octopus crush his ship would stun Dev into submission, but he’s as stubborn as ever. He hasn’t *completely* changed.

Knowing the way he thinks, I imagine Ophelia, Luca, Tia, Franklin and Dr Hewett are still being held prisoner on the island. Dev is racing to take charge of his hostages personally so he can use their lives as leverage.

I check Gem’s readout. ‘Can we disable them –?’

‘Cannons are still offline,’ Gem says. ‘Besides, it’s too late.’

The purple blip of the skiff disappears into the tunnel.

‘Our people will be guarded,’ Halimah warns. ‘When Dev arrives, he’ll dig in for a stand-off.’

‘Which is why we’ll attack now,’ I decide, ‘before he has time to regroup.’

Gem frowns. ‘Ana, the *Nautilus* is in no condition –’

‘The *Nautilus* stays here.’ I put my hand on the console and continue in Bundeli. ‘*Nautilus*, I’ve got to try to save our people. If anything happens to me, protect your crew. They’re your family now, whether they are Dakkar or not.’

Halimah raises an eyebrow. Aside from me, she’s the Dolphin on board who’s most fluent in South Asian languages, so she understands Bundeli well. ‘You think the *Nautilus* will listen to us?’

‘Absolutely.’ I hope I sound more confident than I feel. ‘Halimah, you have the bridge. Gem, you and I are taking the skiff. We’re going after Dev. We’re going to end this. Get all the guns you can carry.’

Gem’s smile makes me glad he’s on my side. ‘I thought you’d never ask.’



CHAPTER FIFTY-FOUR

Gem packs light.

He only brings his regular sidearms, a Leyden pistol, a Leyden rifle bandolier of high-tech grenades he found who-knows-where. No flamethrower, and he hasn't dismantled the forward cannon to lug it al either. For him, this shows great restraint.

I bring only a Leyden pistol and my dive knife. Still, the skiff is a sn especially since we're wearing dive suits and helmets. We're not sure we'll be facing. The skiff has no weapons or defences. We may need t it at a moment's notice. I suppose we could take the top off and make i convertible, but this doesn't seem like the right occasion for a joyride.

Strapped in and sealed up, we flood the docking bay. The floor irise and we drop into the blue. I ease forward on the throttle. The skiff resp like a Maserati. (Full disclosure: I have never driven a Maserati.) We z towards Lincoln Base, following the LOCUS sphere's guidance systen

'They've had a week to set up new defences,' Gem muses. 'Could b contact mines in the tunnel. Lasers.'

'Maybe,' I say. 'But at the speed Dev raced through it –'

'Yeah,' Gem agrees. 'Dev tends to play an offensive game. Let's ke eyes peeled anyway.'

I glance over. I forget that Dev was Gem's house captain. Over the l years, they've probably spent more time together than Dev and I have.

On the side of Gem's face, the trickle of blood has dried in a grim serpentine design. In the faint glow of his fishbowl helmet, his counter reminds me of the bronze Shiva statue my dad used to keep in our fam

shrine: serene and vigilant, ready to smite evildoers by any means nece
Maybe I can see some similarity between Gem, Dev and Dr Hewett aft
they all have the same aura of latent ferocity.

'When we get there,' I say, 'our first priority is saving the hostages.'

'If they're alive.'

'They will be.' I force myself to believe it. 'Otherwise, Dev wouldn
racing back to the base. We do whatever's needed to free them, but we
use lethal force unless we have to.'

Gem scowls. 'Define "have to".'

'Gem …'

'I'm kidding. Mostly.'

We plunge into the mouth of the cave.

I wish I had time to appreciate how well the skiff handles. The adve
could have in this thing! I wonder what Socrates would think if I show
in the skiff to give him dance lessons and squid.

The thought of my dolphin friend brings me back to the present. Soc
is probably in the *least* danger of anyone at Lincoln Base. Still … I rol
forward on the control sphere, pushing us faster through the tunnel.

As soon as we emerge from the lava tube, our LOCUS display flicke
back to life.

'EJECT!' I yell, before I have time to process why.

Dev's skiff is waiting for us. A millisecond after I register it on the
LOCUS, I see it with my own eyes: a black wedge bristling with weap
like the spines of a porcupine fish. It faces us from only fifty feet away
behind its transparent front view shield, in the pilot's seat, is my brothe

Maybe it's something in his face, or just my instincts. I punch the
emergency eject: simultaneously killing our engine, blowing the roof a
launching Gem and me out of our seats. It's a good thing we're already
dive suits. We hurtle forward, driven by momentum and our jet boots c
the top of Dev's submersible as he fires a projectile at our now-abando
skiff. The silver harpoon impales the seat where I was sitting a momen
before, discharging a fractal lacework of blue lightning.

We sail over Dev's stern. Before Dev can turn to face us, Gem shou
his Leyden rifle and fires two rounds straight into the submersible's
propulsion system. Green flashes illuminate the engine casing. The pro
freezes. Deprived of power, Dev's sub lists to port and begins to sink.

'Should we pull out the crew?' Gem asks.

essary. I am shaking with rage and adrenalin. Part of me wants to prise my l
ter all – from that heavily armed shoebox just so I can kick him in the groin. H
wasn't wearing a dive suit when I glimpsed him through the window o
' sub. It will take him and his boarding party time to either restore powe
gear up and abandon ship, but I'm sure they'll survive. Dev is resource
't be 'The hostages are more important,' I say. 'We keep going.'
don't We jet through the lagoon, stirring up clouds of luminous phytoplan
our wake. As the dock's pylons come into view, gunfire rains down fr
above, the bullets punching white funnel clouds into the water before t
and density stop them cold.

At five metres deep, we're safe from just about any kind of conventi
ammo fired from the dock. On the other hand, we can't fire up at them
ntures I any success. Land Institute must know this. They're just sending us a
ed up message. *We're here, we know you're there, and if you try to surface y*
dead.
crates 'Under the dock,' I suggest. 'Come up behind them.'
l 'Got it,' Gem says.

But Land Institute saves us the trouble. Apparently, they're feeling l
ers kids on Christmas morning. We're their presents, and they want to ope
right now. The gunfire stops. Two divers plunge feet first into the wate
on top of us, engulfing us in a tornado of bubbles.

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But Land Institute saves us the trouble. Apparently, they're feeling like kids on Christmas morning. We're their presents, and they want to open us *right now*. The gunfire stops. Two divers plunge feet first into the water, right on top of us, engulfing us in a tornado of bubbles.



CHAPTER FIFTY-FIVE

Underwater hand-to-hand combat is the worst.

It's like trying to fight someone to the death while wearing one of th inflatable sumo-wrestler costumes. Your movements are slow, cumber and ridiculous. You can't get any muscle behind your punches and kic But, since we can't zap our enemies point-blank underwater without za ourselves, Gem and I don't have much choice.

The nearest diver jabs me with his knife.

If I were wearing a regular wetsuit, I'd be dead. As it is, my nemoni weave deflects the point, but it doesn't spare me completely. The razor edge rips the fabric and grazes my ribs.

Salt water and open wounds are a painful combination. My left side up. White spots swim in my eyes. Nevertheless, I use my boots to wres attacker, pushing him backwards into one of the pier's pylons. His air t hits the post with a dull *clink*. I grab his wrist, stopping his blade an in from my face.

To my left, the sounds of bubbles and angry grunts tell me Gem is fi the second diver. I can't risk a glance to see how he's doing.

My opponent glares at me through his scuba mask, his eyes full of h imagine he's heard about the destruction of the *Aronnax*. He wants rev

I'm not going to win a contest of strength against him, especially wi left side in agony. My Leyden gun is useless in close quarters, so, whil enemy is focused on trying to stab me in the face, I grope for my knife instead. Before the diver realizes what's happening, I unsheathe my bl stab him in the BC vest.

I don’t have the strength to wound him seriously, but that’s not my g
With his vest’s air bladder punctured, my opponent is blinded by bubb
starts to sink, instinctively releasing my wrist and flailing for balance.
way down, I kick him in the face for good measure.

I imagine he’ll be back, but in the meantime I turn towards Gem.

Despite all his guns, Mr Twain has got himself into a bit of a jam. T
second LI diver apparently landed in the water *behind* him and has ma
to wrap one arm around Gem’s neck. He’s now attempting to pop Gem
helmet to get at the tasty prizes inside. Gem struggles to free himself, f
one of his SIG Sauers next to his attacker’s ear, but even for Gem it’s n
easy to blast someone who’s strangling him from behind.

I squeeze a burst of speed from my boots and zip towards them.
Unfortunately, I slam right into the diver’s steel air tank, which hurts n
more than it does him.

At least I get his attention. The diver turns to face me.

I have time to register his blue eyes and the dark hair billowing arou
face before he disappears as if ripped from the universe. A large silver
slams into him with such force he seems to teleport sixty feet away in t
blink of an eye.

Socrates has entered the chat.

He’s brought friends, too. While he headbutts the blue-eyed diver in
submission, three of the local bottlenose dolphins descend on the other
who has picked the wrong moment to reappear. It must be terrifying to
three large marine animals jump you all at once. The dolphins welcom
to the neighbourhood with an extreme tail-fin smackdown.

Gem’s voice speaks in my helmet. ‘I really love those dolphins.’

‘Dolphins are the best,’ I agree. ‘Much better than Sharks.’

‘I didn’t say *that*.’

I laugh, which sends hot needles jabbing into my side.

‘You’re hurt,’ Gem notes.

‘I’m fine.’

‘That cloud of blood pluming from your suit says otherwise.’

‘Don’t worry about it. We need to keep going.’ I give Socrates a qui
thank you in sign language. Whether he notices or not, I can’t tell, sinc
still playing with his new diver toy.

Gem and I jet to the back of the dock. We surface cautiously, scanni
above us, but as far as we can tell there are no other hostiles waiting. E

goal. les. He On his he naged n's iring not ne nd his blur the to guy, have e him ck e he's ng ven

the dragonfly drones seem to have abandoned the cavern. I hope they e on their own and weren't captured or destroyed.

Gem draws his Leyden gun. He guards me while I climb the nearest The effort is excruciating, but I make it to the top without passing out getting attacked. I gesture for Gem to follow.

Once he's joined me, we take off our helmets.

'We really need to bandage that,' he says, pointing to my ribs.

The bleeding looks a lot worse out of the water. I don't want to knov bad the wound is. 'There's no time –'

'No time for you to pass out in combat, either.' Gem peels off the to his dive suit.

My face starts to burn. 'Gem, what are you –?'

'It'll just take a sec.' He strips off his T-shirt.

'But –'

He rips his shirt in half. 'We can wrap this around –'

'Gem, not to kill your "gallant knight" vibe or anything, but there's aid kit in the cabinet right there.' I point to one of Luca's many supply lockers.

Gem frowns at his ruined T-shirt. 'I knew that.'

We take cover as best we can between two of the supply sheds. Gem bandages me up with gauze while I keep watch. I do not at all feel awk or distracted by the fact that Gem is shirtless while he's tending my wo It's totally fine. Business as usual.

My eyes flit from the lagoon's calm waters to the vault door at the e the pier. I'm waiting for Dev's damaged skiff to surface, or for more g to pour onto the dock from the base. It's not a question of whether som else will attack us – it's a question of how soon and from which directi

'Good enough,' I tell Gem at last. 'Tie off the bandages and let's go

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My eyes flit from the lagoon's calm waters to the vault door at the end of the pier. I'm waiting for Dev's damaged skiff to surface, or for more guards to pour onto the dock from the base. It's not a question of whether someone else will attack us – it's a question of how soon and from which direction.

'Good enough,' I tell Gem at last. 'Tie off the bandages and let's go.'



CHAPTER FIFTY-SIX

The lagoon’s vault door opens for my handprint. You can’t keep a goo
Dakkar out, I guess. Or a bad one, since Dev was probably the last one
it.

Pistols drawn, Gem peeks into the corridor. It’s empty. I see no one
standing guard at the other end, but that doesn’t mean anything. Hostil
could be waiting in the room just beyond. The straight cylindrical pass
will offer us no cover for fifty feet. Any sound we make will reverbera
Unfortunately, from where we are, this is the only way back into the ba

‘Wait here, please,’ Gem whispers.

Crouching like a cat, he inches into the corridor. He’s about twenty
when two LI students pop out from either side of the tunnel’s far exit a
their Leyden guns. They must have been lying in ambush, but Gem is
A nanosecond before they pull their triggers, Gem fires his SIG Sauers
guards drop like sandbags. Their miniature harpoon projectiles scrape
of sparks as they skitter harmlessly across the walls of the corridor.

I have to remind myself to breathe. I can’t decide whether I’m reliev
horrified. Did Gem just …? No, those couldn’t have been lethal rounds
glance behind me, but the lagoon grotto is still empty. If Gem’s gunfir
alert every hostile in the base, I’m pretty sure my pounding heartbeat v

Gem crouches lower. He moves to his left, keeping his eyes on the f
No one else appears from the room. He creeps forward. When he reach
opposite end, he sweeps the area with his gun sights, then kicks the fal
guards to make sure they’re no threat.

‘Clear,’ he calls to me, his voice low.

I limp down the hall, my side on fire. Blood is already soaking throu bandages. When I join Gem, I look down at the guards, both of whom nasty red welts in the middle of their foreheads. I take the name of a ce Nazarene carpenter in vain.

'Please don't blaspheme,' Gem says automatically. 'I used rubber ar They might have nasty headaches when they wake up, but they won't

'How are you not in shock?' I ask.

'I've been in shock for days,' he whispers, then points to the next cc 'Aren't the security monitors in the room just ahead?'

Without further challenges, we reach the monitors in question. Why surveillance room is not guarded, I don't know, but I suspect it's becau Gem just shot the guards in the head. Gem stands watch at the door wh cycle through views from the various cameras.

The base is mostly empty … *very* empty. The armoury has been stri Luca's gold-level boxes and alt-tech experiments have disappeared fro workshop. In the server room, Ophelia's computers are either gone or disassembled, their hard drives probably pulled. And in the sickbay …

An ice cube lodges in my throat. The patient's bed is empty.

'Where's Hewett?' I wonder.

Gem starts. 'What?'

'Hold on …' I toggle through more cameras, my fingers trembling. wrong about the hostages, if they and Dr Hewett were on board the *Ar* … I switch to the view of the front dock, and my shoulders relax just a

'There he is,' I tell Gem. 'Two hostiles are bringing his stretcher ab the *Varuna*.'

Gem frowns. 'Why would they –?'

'Insurance,' I guess. 'They've stripped all the information and tech t can from the base. With the *Aronnax* gone, the *Varuna* is their only wa

Gem's expression hardens. 'And with Hewett on board they figure v less likely to attack the ship. What about the other hostages?'

'Not sure …' I toggle through more live feeds. 'Oh.' The ice cube sl further down my oesophagus. 'Dining room. The good news is they're alive …'

Gem risks a look at the screen.

The bad news is our friends are being held at gunpoint. In the middl dining room, Luca, Ophelia, Franklin and Tia are on their knees with t hands tied behind their backs. Two hostiles stand behind them with Le

ıgh the guns trained on their heads. Two more hostiles, also armed with zappy
have harpoons, pace the room restlessly, like they're waiting for orders …
ertain ‘Human shields,’ Gem mutters. ‘They take Hewett on the ship, leav
rest of our people here under guard. More insurance to let the *Varuna* g
ımmo. away safely. We have to take the dining hall, then reach the boat befor
die.’ casts off.’
‘But if we go charging in there –’
ɔrridor. Above our heads, the ceiling vent rattles. I almost leap out of my sq
boots. Gem trains his guns on the levered slates. The head of a small m
the insect pokes out, its glittery eyes like Fabergé eggs.
ıse I laugh with relief. ‘*Pilot Bug?*’
ıile I I can't be sure if it's the same drone who guided our ship into the la
days ago, but it spits a festive electrical spark as if it's happy to see us.
pped. it buzzes out of its hiding place, followed by half a dozen of its shiny e
ım his insect friends.
‘Oh, you beautiful bots!’ I run a finger down Pilot Bug's back, maki
wings flutter. ‘I'm so glad you guys are safe.’
The bugs snap their mandibles and spit sparks, letting me know how
feel about LI taking over their base.
Gem shakes his head in amazement. ‘They must've been hiding in t
If I wasducts this whole time.’
ɔnnax *The ductwork.*
little. An idea starts to tingle at the base of my brain. I look at the bugs, th
ɔard monitor, then the AC vent. ‘Gem, do you have any non-lethal grenades
‘Sure, but why …?’ His eyes gleam. ‘Oh, I get you.’ He pulls one of
alt-tech baubles from his bandolier. ‘Pilot Bug, could you fly with this
:hey weight?’
ıy out.’ Pilot Bug's wings buzz indignantly. He spools out his copper tongue
ve're coils it around the grenade.
‘Perfect,’ Gem says. ‘One bug can carry; another can pull the pin. T
lides short-burst EMP. It won't hurt people, but it should knock out anythin
still electronic in an enclosed room. Pilot Bug, as soon as you drop it, you n
get away from there *quick*.’
‘Hold on,’ I say. ‘Will it work on their Leyden guns?’
e of the Gem tilts his head. ‘I *think* so. Usually a thin metal sheath is enough
heir protect a piece of electronics. Our Leyden bullets are encased in carbo
yden inside a nemonium magazine. If we're outside the room when the blas

off, our weapons might be okay. But theirs … those harpoons carry the charge on the outside of the projectile. An EMP blast should at least sh circuit them, make them less dangerous. It might even make the weapc malfunction altogether.'

'*Might.*'

He spreads his hands. 'I can't promise.'

'We'll need something more, then. Something to disorientate the gu …' It's difficult to think with my side throbbing and adrenalin jackhammering in my temples, but I recall how the LI commandos atta the *Varuna* when we were leaving San Alejandro. 'Gem, you wouldn't happen to have …'

Apparently, his mind is working along the same lines. 'A Nemo vers a flash bang?' He pulls another grenade from his bandolier and grins a Shark-like grin. 'Why, yes I do. And payback is my favourite dessert.'

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'*Might.*'

He spreads his hands. 'I can't promise.'

'We'll need something more, then. Something to disorientate the guards …' It's difficult to think with my side throbbing and adrenalin jackhammering in my temples, but I recall how the LI commandos attacked the *Varuna* when we were leaving San Alejandro. 'Gem, you wouldn't happen to have …'

Apparently, his mind is working along the same lines. 'A Nemo version of a flash bang?' He pulls another grenade from his bandolier and grins a very Shark-like grin. 'Why, yes I do. And payback is my favourite dessert.'



CHAPTER FIFTY-SEVEN

‘WE GIVE UP!’ I yell.

This seems like a good way to open negotiations.

Gem and I have pressed ourselves against either wall of the corridor outside the dining room. The door is closed, and it’s a good thing I’m n standing in front of it, since the tip of a Leyden harpoon punches throu wood the moment I speak. The guards inside must be getting jumpy. B left behind on an enemy base to watch hostages so their classmates car a break for it probably isn’t doing wonders for their morale.

‘STOP FIRING!’ I shout. ‘THIS IS ANA DAKKAR! I WANT TO SURRENDER!’

Silence from the dining room. No more harpoons pierce the door.

‘Miei amici!’ Luca yells from inside. ‘Run! Do not –’

‘Shut up!’ barks another voice, followed by an ugly *smack*.

‘Leave my husband alone!’ Ophelia shouts.

‘HEY!’ I yell. ‘HEY, LI, LISTEN TO ME! Or don’t you want the c for capturing me alive?’

There’s a tense exchange of words among the guards. Apparently, th scenario was not covered in their senior-project playbook.

One of them shouts, ‘Open the door slowly. Show us your hands.’

Gem meets my eyes and nods. It’s not because he heard the guard. U me, Gem has first-aid cotton balls stuffed in his ears, so he can’t hear n of anything. But enough time should have gone by for our commando dragonflies to get into position.

‘Okay, I’m opening the door!’ I yell to the guards. ‘Don’t kill me! I’ good to you dead!’

This is the tricky part. Well … the whole thing is tricky, but I want t guards focused on my grand entrance, not on the hostages. I grip the d handle. I turn it slowly and start to pull the door towards me.

'I'm going to show you my hands now!' I lie. 'Chiudete gli occhi!'

I say this in the same tone as everything else, so it sounds like just a concession I'm about to make. Even if the LI guards speak Italian, I'm gambling that the order *Close your eyes* won't make any sense to them context, but Luca might get the message. And the robo-bugs will hear agreed-upon code phrase.

It happens fast. From inside, I hear the *plunk, plunk* of two metal ob hitting the floor, followed by a confused 'WHAT THE –?' because gre do not normally fall from ventilation ducts. Then a tsunami of colour a sound blasts from the dining room.

I think I'm mentally prepared for the alt-tech flash bang, but I'm rea Even shielded by a half-closed door, I feel like a three-day psychedelic festival is being stuffed down my ears over the course of a millisecond Fluorescent jellyfish dance in my eyes. I have just enough presence of to stagger out of the way as Gem pushes past me and bursts into the di room, his guns blazing.

I stumble in after him, my Leyden pistol raised, but there's no one le shoot at.

Our friends are still alive, though they've looked better. They're cur their sides now, groaning and squinting. Luca has a black eye. Ophelia busted lip. Blood trickles from Tia's left ear. Franklin has just finished throwing up.

All four hostiles are out cold, spread-eagled on the floor, goofy grin frozen on their faces like they really enjoyed that millisecond concert b Gem shot them in the heads with rubber bullets. Their Leyden harpoon are all burning and smoking.

'Well, that worked,' I note.

'WHAT?' Gem asks.

I point at his ears, reminding him about the cotton. Then I rush to un friends.

'Hello, there,' Ophelia grumbles. 'Lovely to see you again. Thank y much for the grenades.'

'Sorry about that.' I pull my dive knife and saw through her zip tie.

'Quite all right,' she assures me. 'The *Nautilus*? The crew?'

I give them the brief version: the *Aronnax* has been destroyed, the *N* is banged up but okay, and the base has been cleared (for now), thanks robot dragonfly freedom fighters.

Luca giggles, his tone slightly hysterical. ‘Oh. Chiudete gli occhi! N get it! I think I may be blind!’

‘It should pass,’ I tell him, hoping I’m right.

Franklin retches. ‘I can taste the colour turquoise. Is that normal?’

‘Ana, are you okay?’ Tia asks. ‘Your bandages are soaked with bloc

‘You should see the other guy.’ I don’t mention that Tia, Franklin, L and Ophelia also look like they’ve been worked over by the local gang dolphins. ‘I’m sorry we couldn’t get here sooner.’

‘You kidding?’ Tia winces as I snap her restraints. ‘We were prepar hold out for at least a month.’

‘Well, we could come back later …’

‘Now is good. Thanks, Captain.’

‘We need to get to the *Varuna*,’ Gem says, clipping Franklin’s zip ti

‘Yeah.’ Franklin smacks his lips, probably trying to clear the taste o and turquoise. ‘They took Dr Hewett. He was responding well to treatr but he’s in *no* shape to be moved.’

‘They’ve also taken our best research and tech,’ Ophelia adds. With steel-framed glasses, she looks a bit like a mole dragged blinking and disorientated from a nice dark tunnel. ‘They must be stopped. Go!’

‘None of you are in any shape to fight,’ I fret. ‘And Dev could be cc in from the lagoon any minute.’

‘Are your Leyden guns still functional?’ Ophelia asks. ‘Leave us so those.’

Gem donates his Leyden rifle to Tia, his Leyden pistol to Franklin, a remaining grenades to Luca.

Luca beams. ‘I love grenades! Thank you!’

I hand Ophelia my pistol. This leaves me with just my dive knife an with his SIG Sauers, but that will have to do.

‘What about our friends here?’ Gem gestures at the four unconsciou guards.

‘Oh, not to worry.’ Tia gets a wicked glint in her eyes. ‘I’m persona going to give them the pink-ducky treatment. Now get going!’

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CHAPTER FIFTY-EIGHT

As Gem and I race through the front corridor, I try the comm on my dr collar. ‘Dakkar to *Nautilus*, do you read?’

The line hisses. ‘*Nautilus* here,’ Halimah says. ‘Are you okay?’

‘More or less. Hostiles have the *Varuna*. They’re making a run for it have Dr Hewett on board. Gem and I will try to intercept. Do you copy

‘We – Say again –?’ The comm goes dead.

‘Mine is out, too,’ Gem says.

With the amount of abuse our suits have taken today, I guess I shoul surprised. Even if Halimah got the gist of my message, the *Nautilus* is shape to give us any assistance. We’re on our own.

We burst onto the dock of the lagoon. The sunlight blinds me. I have been outside in the surface world for over a week. There’s too much sk horizons are too wide. The colours are too bright.

The rev of a boat’s engines shakes me from my paralysis. The *Varu* pulling away from the dock.

Gem sprints after it. He takes a flying leap and lands on the transom jump is not as graceful. I slam into the aft railing, which doesn’t do wo for my wounded side. Gem grabs my arm to keep me from falling over

‘Thanks,’ I grumble.

‘Take a gun.’ He offers me one of his SIG Sauers. I have never seen let anyone touch one of his precious twins before.

I start to protest. ‘Gem –’

‘Please,’ he says. ‘Just do it for me.’

I take the gun.

The *Varuna* picks up speed, heading north for the wide new gap tha
Aronnax's weapons blasted in the atoll's ring. From where we stand, I
see anyone else on board. I hope that means the boat is lightly manned
small numbers, like one or two.

'Split up?' Gem asks, gesturing to port and starboard.

'That's always a mistake in the movies,' I say.

'Fair enough.'

Together, we make our way forward along the port gunwale, me lea
Gem guarding my six.

We reach the middeck. Still no one in sight. This feels wrong. The r
the engines is deafening. I'd forgotten how loud the upper world can b

I turn … and my question to Gem devolves into a scream when I see
familiar figure looming behind him.

Too late, Gem pivots. My brother smacks him across the head with a
ratchet.

Gem collapses. Dev kicks his gun across the deck.

I step back, my heart in my throat. Gem's second P226 quivers in m
like a dowsing rod.

My brother glares at me. His hair has its usual cowlick crest along th
front, but I don't find it endearing any more. It looks like something da
menacing is trying to push its way out of his skull. Somehow, he must
repaired the skiff well enough to intercept the *Varuna*. Where the rest o
boarding party went, I have no idea, but Dev by himself is enough of a
problem. Water trickles down the black neoprene of his wetsuit. It's th
one he wore the last morning we dived together – emblazoned with the
of the HP Shark captain. I tighten my grip on the gun.

Dev sneers, tossing aside his wrench. 'You're really going to shoot r
Go ahead.'

God, I want to. I know the bullets are non-lethal. I hate that my trigg
finger is rebelling against me. But Dev is still my brother. No matter w
he's done, I find shooting him at point-blank range very difficult to ma

'I thought so,' he growls. 'Stupid little girl, you've ruined everythin

Then he charges at me.

The *Varuna* picks up speed, heading north for the wide new gap that the *Aronnax*'s weapons blasted in the atoll's ring. From where we stand, I can't see anyone else on board. I hope that means the boat is lightly manned. I like small numbers, like one or two.

'Split up?' Gem asks, gesturing to port and starboard.

'That's always a mistake in the movies,' I say.

'Fair enough.'

Together, we make our way forward along the port gunwale, me leading, Gem guarding my six.

We reach the middeck. Still no one in sight. This feels wrong. The roar of the engines is deafening. I'd forgotten how loud the upper world can be.

I turn … and my question to Gem devolves into a scream when I see a familiar figure looming behind him.

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I step back, my heart in my throat. Gem's second P226 quivers in my hand like a dowsing rod.

My brother glares at me. His hair has its usual cowlick crest along the front, but I don't find it endearing any more. It looks like something dark and menacing is trying to push its way out of his skull. Somehow, he must have repaired the skiff well enough to intercept the *Varuna*. Where the rest of his boarding party went, I have no idea, but Dev by himself is enough of a problem. Water trickles down the black neoprene of his wetsuit. It's the same one he wore the last morning we dived together – emblazoned with the logo of the HP Shark captain. I tighten my grip on the gun.

Dev sneers, tossing aside his wrench. 'You're really going to shoot me? Go ahead.'

God, I want to. I know the bullets are non-lethal. I hate that my trigger finger is rebelling against me. But Dev is still my brother. No matter what he's done, I find shooting him at point-blank range very difficult to manage.

'I thought so,' he growls. 'Stupid little girl, you've ruined everything.'

Then he charges at me.



CHAPTER FIFTY-NINE

The two of us have had the same combat training, but Dev has had yea more practice.

He grabs my wrist, slapping the gun from my hand, then steps in an twists, attempting to throw me over his shoulder. I use the 'boneless to defence, collapsing so my entire body weight works against him. He sl off-balance, and I turn my fall into a backwards roll, leveraging Dev's grip to pull him with me. He sails over my head and crashes into the starboard gunwale.

One point for Ana.

My wounded side is on fire. I can feel warm blood trickling down m belly. I struggle to my feet. Dev rises, looking unperturbed.

'You're wounded,' he notes.

He has the audacity to sound concerned. His earlier words still drip mind like hydrochloric acid. *Stupid little girl.*

'You've already lost, Dev.'

'I don't think so. We've got enough tech and data now to make our *Aronnax* a *Nautilus*-killer. And I don't think your friends will be bothe this boat with your poor sick professor on board.'

He attacks with a flurry of punches that forces me back to the port ra

I block, parry and dodge, but my limbs are growing heavy. My head like it's floating on my neck.

I sidestep and trap Dev's arm, hoping to dislocate his elbow. But he that move too well. He sinks on one leg and sweep-kicks me off my fe roll out of the way and come up just in time to block his next kick.

He backs away, giving me time to breathe. ‘We don’t have to fight, We’re still family.’

My weakness is making him calmer, kinder. I hate this about him. H me being his needy little sister – the junior Dakkar.

‘Yes, we’re family.’ I wince as I regain my footing. ‘Which is why y betrayal hurts so much.’

I push him across the deck, determined to wipe that smug smile fron face, but he easily parries my attacks.

The *Varuna* speeds through the break in the atoll. The midday sun b my shoulders. My nemonium drysuit is light and flexible, but it was nc designed for surface hand-to-hand combat. I am breathing hard, slowir down, wearing myself out. Dev knows it.

Anger gives me momentum.

I feint with a jab step, then land a punch to Dev’s gut. My gym teacl Kind, would have been proud. Unfortunately, I’m too dizzy to follow through. I stagger away, wheezing, while Dev cradles his sore stomach

‘I’m not the traitor, Ana,’ he says through gritted teeth. ‘Harding-Pe got our parents killed. HP could’ve used Nemo’s tech a hundred times the world. Instead they kept it locked up. They shut us out of our inher

I glance over at Gem, still lying facedown on the deck. His fingers a twitching, but there’s no way he’ll be battle-ready any time soon. At le Land Institute upperclassmen are running onto the deck to help Dev.

It’s just me and my brother. Like old times. Except completely diffe

‘The *Nautilus* isn’t our inheritance,’ I say. ‘The *Nautilus* belongs to herself.’

‘*Herself?*’ Dev scoffs. ‘Come on, Ana. It’s a machine made by Princ Dakkar. It belongs to us!’

He lunges, trying for a full-body tackle. I dance out of his path, thou ‘dance’ is more of a clumsy stumble. My chest wound throbs. The insi my drysuit is lacquered with warm, sticky blood.

‘I thought about telling you,’ Dev continues, as if we’re having a cas conversation, ‘but you weren’t ready. You didn’t know about alt-tech. didn’t understand what HP had done to our family. They still have you fooled. It’s time to wake up.’

I scream and charge. It’s not my smartest move. I feint a punch, try t him in the groin, but he’s expecting that. He blocks, then tosses me asi a practice dummy. I land hard on my butt. Pain flares up my spine.

Ana.

‘Give it up,’ Dev snaps. ‘Don’t be stupid.’

Stupid little girl.

Ie likes

Behind me, my fingers close around textured metal. One of Gem’s p

‘I’ll admit, I underestimated you,’ Dev says. ‘That giant octopus …’

your

shakes his head. ‘You’ll have to explain how you pulled *that* off. But y

don’t belong at HP any more than I do. We’re going to board the *Naut*

n his

together, and you’re going to surrender command to me. I *will* take wh

rightfully mine.’

akes

Somehow, I get to my feet.

ɔt

Dev frowns at the gun in my hand. ‘Come on, Ana, you had your ch

ıg

kill me. You couldn’t do it, remember?’

Kill him?

Suddenly I realize why Dev has been so uninterested in Gem’s weap

ıer, Dr

He assumes they are loaded with standard rounds. A laugh bubbles up

throat. Dev has no intention of killing me. And he knows I won’t kill h

ı.

the guns are useless. It would never occur to my brother to use anythin

ncroft

than lethal ammunition. *Dev tends to play an offensive game.*

to save

My hysterical giggle seems to unsettle him.

itance.’

‘Ana, you’ve lost a lot of blood.’ His tone is so caring, so brotherly.

ıre

that down –’

ast no

‘You don’t get it, Dev.’ I raise the gun. ‘What’s *rightfully yours* isn’

sub. It’s your family. Your friends. And you destroyed it all.’

rent.

I shoot him three times. The last rubber bullet snaps his head back, r

an ugly red spot right between his eyes. He falls backwards, crashing s

eagled on the deck.

ce

My hysteria turns to despair. I sob and drop the gun.

I’m not sure how long I spend weeping at my brother’s side. He’ll li

ıgh my

pulse is strong. Still … I’m mourning. Something between us has died

de of

Nearby, Gem groans. ‘Ana?’

I wipe my face. ‘Hey …’ Still wobbly, I straggle to Gem’s side. He

sual

groggy and cross-eyed, but otherwise not too bad for somebody who w

You

recently smacked with a ratchet.

I

I hold up two fingers. ‘How many fingers?’

He squints. ‘Twenty-five?’

to knee

‘Yeah, you’ll be fine.’

de like

‘Is Dev –?’

‘Taken care of,’ I say, trying to keep my voice from breaking. ‘I sho
with rubber bullets.’

istols. Gem’s eyes widen. ‘That couldn’t have been easy, Ana. Are you –?’

He ‘I’m okay,’ I lie. ‘I’ll be okay.’

ou I try to help him sit up, but he groans and lies down again. ‘I think n

ilus should just … stay here for a minute. Why has the boat stopped?’

at’s I hadn’t even noticed. The engines have gone silent. We’re dead in t
water. This means someone stopped the boat. Which means there are n
enemies on board.

ance to ‘I’ll check the bridge,’ I say.

‘You look terrible.’

‘Thanks. Don’t worry, I’ve got this gun.’

ons. ‘It’s a nice gun,’ Gem agrees. ‘Be careful.’

in my I totter off. I imagine I’ll be defeated if I have to fight anything mor

im, so dangerous than a three-year-old with a pool noodle, but I have to secu

g less ship.

On the bridge, I get another surprise. Standing over the unconscious
of an LI upperclassman is a frizzy-haired girl in a nemonium dive suit,

‘Put Leyden gun in her hand.

‘Ester?’ I croak.

t the She turns, looking embarrassed. ‘So I got your comm message. It tu
dolphins aren’t the only ones who can fit through that chute that leads
aising tank in your cabin.’

pread- ‘I love you so much right now,’ I say.

‘I know. I think you’re about to pass out.’

As usual, Ester is right. My knees buckle. She catches me as I collap

ve. His and my consciousness sinks deeper than my body has ever gone.

.

looks

as

‘Taken care of,’ I say, trying to keep my voice from breaking. ‘I shot him with rubber bullets.’

Gem’s eyes widen. ‘That couldn’t have been easy, Ana. Are you –?’

‘I’m okay,’ I lie. ‘I’ll be okay.’

I try to help him sit up, but he groans and lies down again. ‘I think maybe I should just … stay here for a minute. Why has the boat stopped?’

I hadn’t even noticed. The engines have gone silent. We’re dead in the water. This means someone stopped the boat. Which means there are more enemies on board.

‘I’ll check the bridge,’ I say.

‘You look terrible.’

‘Thanks. Don’t worry, I’ve got this gun.’

‘It’s a nice gun,’ Gem agrees. ‘Be careful.’

I totter off. I imagine I’ll be defeated if I have to fight anything more dangerous than a three-year-old with a pool noodle, but I have to secure the ship.

On the bridge, I get another surprise. Standing over the unconscious body of an LI upperclassman is a frizzy-haired girl in a nemonium dive suit, a Leyden gun in her hand.

‘Ester?’ I croak.

She turns, looking embarrassed. ‘So I got your comm message. It turns out dolphins aren’t the only ones who can fit through that chute that leads to the tank in your cabin.’

‘I love you so much right now,’ I say.

‘I know. I think you’re about to pass out.’

As usual, Ester is right. My knees buckle. She catches me as I collapse, and my consciousness sinks deeper than my body has ever gone.



CHAPTER SIXTY

I've always been better at making messes than cleaning them up.

We have some big messes to deal with at Lincoln Base.

The next two days, I am out of commission. Franklin and Ester hook up to the machines in the *Nautilus*'s sickbay, which I'm told will slowl rehydrate me, replenish my blood supply and ensure that my internal o do not explode.

My room-mates are Gem, recovering from his head injury, and Dr H who actually looks better than I remember. During the professor's rare moments of semiconsciousness, he grumbles about his students' substa quiz scores. I never wanted to know what teachers dream about. Now I

Franklin tells me that the *Nautilus* seems to have ideas about how to pancreatic cancer. He isn't sure what compounds the med-bay machine producing, but they are slowly flushing the cancer cells out of Hewett'

Since Nemo understood DNA 150 years ago, I guess I shouldn't be surprised. But as I lie in bed I have time to think about what Dev said - how HP could have used Nemo's technology to save the world a hundr times over.

On the other hand, I've seen what Land Institute's hunger for power my brother. Humans are *still* not ready for all of Nemo's advances. I d know what Land Institute's school motto is, but I want it to be *This is* \ *can't have nice things.*

As for Gem, he stays in the sickbay with me probably longer than he to. Even when Franklin clears him for duty, Gem says, 'Maybe I'll rest bit longer. Head injuries can be tricky, right?'

Franklin frowns at him, then at me. ‘Yeah. Sure. Tricky.’

I laugh, which hurts my newly stitched side. ‘Gem, you don’t have t bodyguard duty any more. I’m fine.’

He glances towards the corridor, which may be the first time I’ve ev him take his eyes off a target. ‘Not a bodyguard. Maybe I could just, y know, stay as a friend.’

A warm feeling spreads out from my sternum. I remember what Ge me days ago, in Lincoln Base’s sickbay: *I don’t have many connection the ones I do have are important.*

I realize I am now included in that very small group of important connections, and I wouldn’t have it any other way.

‘Of course,’ I say. ‘I’d welcome your company.’

Franklin starts to protest, ‘But Gem’s injuries aren’t even –’

‘Franklin,’ Gem and I say in unison.

‘Right,’ grumbles the medic. ‘I’ll go get some lunch.’

Our other casualties from the battle are, fortunately, minor. There w deaths on either side, which in itself is a miracle. Thanks to the Orcas’ efforts, the entire crew of the *Aronnax* were rescued. Many of them we wounded. Some nearly drowned. Most will have chapodiphobia for the of their days, but they will all live. Battered and shocked, they offered resistance as my crew herded them into Lincoln Base’s improvised hol cells.

On the fourth day after the battle, I feel good enough to go diving.

I find our giant friend Romeo tucked away in a cosy abyss just south island. He comes up to say hello when I play my keytar. I do my best t convey our gratitude. I also try asking if he wants us to give him a ride to where we met him, but he seems content to stay with us.

Over the next few days, whenever Ester and Top take a walk around what’s left of the atoll, Romeo surfaces and watches them, while Top l happily and goes into his ‘play bow’. I have nightmares about Romeo learning to play fetch with the dog, throwing a ball all the way to Fiji, Top trying to swim after it.

As for Socrates, he doesn’t seem sure what to make of the giant octo Socrates likes his cephalopods small and tasty, not big enough to eat *h* and the rest of his adopted dolphin family give Romeo a wide berth, bu otherwise they seem happy. I feed them many delicious squid and than for their help in the battle.

When Socrates asks about my brother – doing a little flick of his fin
o be on I've learned to translate as *Dev* – I don't know what to tell him. At leas
underwater I can cry as much as I want. The ocean doesn't care about
er seen more drops of salt water.
ou Once the *Nautilus* is back up and running, Tia Romero oversees our
recovery efforts on the wreckage of the *Aronnax*. It will take weeks to
n told complete, but we need to understand how far Land Institute has come i
s. So research. Also, we don't want all that junk littering the ocean floor on
front lawn.
On the fifth day, we set our prisoners free – all of them except Dev.
a popular decision. They're still our enemies, with too much blood on
hands, but we aren't set up to run a prison camp indefinitely, and there
easy way to bring Land Institute to justice or to prove what they've do
any court of law. The best bad choice I have is to let them go, knowing
we may face them again in the future. I give them the *Varuna*, though
ere no me to do so. We stock the boat with enough food, water and fuel to ma
quick the California coast. We strip the ship of anything dangerous or valuab
ere weapons, LOCUS, dynamic camouflage. We even remove the books fi
e rest library.
no Honestly, our hostages shouldn't complain. We've been treating the
lding and feeding them Jupiter's baked delicacies. They've all put on a few p
They'd never admit it, but I suspect they will miss the gâteau mille-feu
d'orang-outan.
n of the Caleb South is indignant when I give him command of the *Varuna*.
o would you do this? You're just letting us go. And we know where you
back is.'
'Yes, you do,' I say. 'You also know what happened when you tried
l take us on. Twenty of our freshmen beat your entire senior class. You
parks rematch, come on back.'
His eye twitches, but he says nothing. A few minutes later, I watch
and command ship motor out of the lagoon.
'You think it was smart to goad him like that?' Gem asks.
opus. Nelinha makes a face. 'It was *perfect*. Let them come back if they da
im. He I suspect that's mostly bravado on her part. Nobody wants a repeat
ut we just went through. But Nelinha has earned the right to boast a little.
k them won a hard victory. All my friends should feel good about what we've
accomplished.

The next day, Dr Hewett is able to move around with the help of a w
I take him to the pier in the cavern, which he has never actually seen. V
admire the glowing green robo-bugs zipping overhead, and the lumino
phytoplankton festival in the water. Most of all, we admire the *Nautilu*

Hewett is dressed in an old blue dressing gown and pyjamas. His fac
still haggard. His white hair is like a greasy tuft of cotton just burst fro
pod. But he's alive, and he doesn't stink. I take those two things as sig
progress.

'Ana, you've done better than I ever imagined,' he tells me.

I study his face. He's never called me Ana before.

'Is that a compliment?' I ask carefully. 'I'm not sure how well you
imagined me doing.'

He wheezes. 'Oh, please don't make me laugh. It hurts. No, Prefect
Captain Dakkar. I always knew you were capable of greatness. I am sc
did not show you that, or extend you the respect you deserved.'

I narrow my eyes. 'But?'

'No *but*,' he assures me. 'It's true that Dev was everyone's focus,
including mine. I worried he was too impetuous, too angry, too … We
much like me, and like the students I taught at Land Institute. That's w
tried so hard to counsel him. Still, I never imagined he would …' Hew
shakes his head sadly. 'At any rate, *you* were the one we should have b
preparing for command. Despite insufficient training, in the midst of u
tragedy, look what you have accomplished.' He gestures at the *Nautilu*

'Have you decided what we will do next?'

My feet feel glued to the dock. '*We?* Is that really my decision?'

Dr Hewett arches his shaggy eyebrows. 'Oh, yes. You are Captain N
now. The *Nautilus* has accepted you. The remaining students have acc
you. And the faculty … what remains of us … we have seen your pote
We will assist you, continue your training if you wish. But you will se
course. Whatever you decide, we are here for you.'

I'm grateful to hear this, but I also feel strangely uneasy. I wonder if
what it means to be a leader, and if the doubts ever go away.

'I have to talk to Ester,' I tell him. 'And the rest of the class, of cour
But, yes, I think I know what happens next …'

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CHAPTER SIXTY-ONE

The answer is dinner.

The answer is always dinner.

First, I check with Ester. She is in complete agreement with my plan I run my ideas past Gem and Nelinha. They are both on board. Nelinha comment is ‘Of course. Duh.’

Top listens and wags his tail, which means either he loves the way I or he wants a treat.

That night, the entire crew gathers around the dining table in the ma of Lincoln Base. *The Great British Bake Off* is playing in the backgrou our comfort soundtrack of choice. Jupiter waddles around, handing out of crespelle alla fiorentina. The wafer-thin pancakes are made from po flour and buttery-tasting algae oil. The ‘ricotta-and-spinach’ filling is carrageen-moss extract and seaweed. The sauce … You know what? I care. I’m just going to eat it, because it tastes good.

Luca regales the crew with stories about how he resisted the Land Ir attack on the island. We’ve already heard them a dozen times, but each they get more elaborate. Ophelia just shakes her head and smirks, occasionally pulling her husband towards her and kissing him.

‘I have married a brilliant man who is also an idiot,’ she muses. ‘Ho this possible?’

After we’ve finished our main course, I ask Gem to turn down *The G British Bake Off*. I clink a fork against my glass to get everyone’s atter rise, because this feels like something I should stand up for.

‘Crew of the *Nautilus*,’ I say, ‘freshman class of Harding-Pencroft, y only alive today because of your brilliance and bravery.’

Nelinha raises her glass. ‘Here’s to being alive!’

This gets some laughs. Glasses are clinked.

When the noise dies down, I forge ahead. ‘Now we have choices to
know that many of you …’ My voice falters. ‘Many of you have famil
the mainland. You’ll want to let them know you’re still alive, probably
the summer at home. After what we’ve been through, some of you may
decide you’re done with this craziness and you want a normal high sch
experience.’

‘*Normal?*’ Franklin mutters, like it’s the worst insult he can think of

‘If so,’ I continue, ‘I support your choice. You can take your share f
the *Nautilus*’s treasury and go your own way, no hard feelings.’

Halimah leans forward. ‘Or?’

Except for Mary Berry waxing poetic about oven temperatures in th
background, the room is completely silent.

‘*Or* we keep working together,’ I say. ‘I love this team. I also know
Land Institute isn’t done. They’ll keep researching. They’ll build a nev
They’ll keep coming for the *Nautilus*. They’ll be more determined than
especially if they think they’ve destroyed the only other school that sto
their way.’

My classmates murmur. Their expressions have turned grim. That te
happen when anyone mentions Land Institute.

‘So Ester and I have been talking,’ I say. ‘We considered starting
something completely new – a clean slate. We all know that Harding-
Pencroft wasn’t perfect. Too many secrets. Too little trust in the studer

Luca coughs. ‘This is awkward.’

‘She’s right, though,’ Ophelia adds.

‘But,’ I say, ‘Harding-Pencroft did a lot of things *right*. Nemo chose
to carry on his legacy. I don’t want to throw out a hundred and fifty ye
tradition. Besides, we’re going to need new generations of students to
keep LI at bay. And those students will need training. Also, since the
Aronnax – since *Dev* sent HP a warning before the attack, it’s possible
of our classmates and teachers got out alive. If so, they might be in hid
afraid for their lives. We need to find them and help them. And we hav
well, almost unlimited funds. Because of all that … Ester?’

Ester stands. She’s gone almost as red as the pomodoro sauce. ‘I wa
rebuild Harding-Pencroft.’

‘Volume, babe,’ Nelinha says.

‘Sorry.’

‘No.’ Nelinha grins. ‘I mean say it LOUDER!’

Ester frowns in consternation, then screams at the top of her lungs, ‘I WANT TO REBUILD HARDING-PENCROFT!’

The crew cheers. Several Sharks pound their fists on the table, much to the annoyance of Jupiter, who is trying to serve the tiramisu.

‘IT WON’T BE EXACTLY THE SAME,’ Ester continues.

‘Now you can bring down the volume,’ Nelinha advises.

‘We’ll have better defences,’ Ester says. ‘Maybe we won’t build quite so close to the cliffs.’

Lots of nodding.

‘We’ll honour my ancestor’s wishes,’ Ester says. ‘And Ana’s ancestors obviously. Our tech has to stay out of the hands of governments and corporations. It *definitely* has to stay out of Land Institute’s possession. And from now on we’ll use the *Nautilus* to train. We’ll use Lincoln Base, too, so we can go back and forth from California easily now.’

Tia whistles appreciatively. ‘Sophomore year is starting to sound interesting.’

‘We keep training,’ I say. ‘We keep fighting LI. We keep learning about Nemo’s tech. We know he had at least a dozen secret bases, and Ester thinks there are more still undiscovered. Who knows what we’ll find? And we haven’t even scratched the surface of what the *Nautilus* can do once we get her in prime shape.’ I glance around at my crew. ‘We will be the first crew in LI HP to actually *crew* Captain Nemo’s ship. Can you imagine how much we will have learned by the time we graduate?’

‘Enough to scare the holy bejabbers out of Land Institute,’ Nelinha says.

‘But I’m not going to lie,’ I conclude. ‘It’ll be a tough three years ahead of us. Rebuilding everything. Always looking over our shoulders for another attack. Those who are interested in staying, maybe just a show of hands.’

I hope about half of them will stay. For me, and for Ester, it’s not really a choice – it’s our destiny. But for the others … They could walk away and have normal lives, along with a robust chunk of change for their college savings accounts.

Instead, every hand goes up.

Gem makes a show of counting votes. ‘I think it’s unanimous. My only question is what’s next, Captain?’

‘To Harding-Pencroft!’ Nelinha yells.

‘To Harding-Pencroft!’ the crew responds. ‘To Captain Nemo!’

I share in the toast and the laughter. I am overwhelmed with love an
I gratitude for my friends. But in the back of my mind I’m also ponderir
Gem’s question: *What’s next?* Because there’s one conversation I still
ı to the have, and it will be the hardest of all.

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‘To Harding-Pencroft!’ the crew responds. ‘To Captain Nemo!’

I share in the toast and the laughter. I am overwhelmed with love and gratitude for my friends. But in the back of my mind I’m also pondering Gem’s question: *What’s next?* Because there’s one conversation I still need to have, and it will be the hardest of all.



CHAPTER SIXTY-TWO

Dev paces restlessly in his cell.

I suppose I can't blame him. It's been two weeks. As nice as the for guest room is, he must be getting stir-crazy.

He stops when he sees me. He's wearing khaki shorts and one of Lu old T-shirts that says UMBRIA JAZZ '09. He's gripping his arms, probably freezing, as usual.

'You're here.' He tries to look angry, but his lower lip quivers. I car he's on the verge of tears. This hurts even worse than the insults he's t at me on my previous visits.

He marches to the grate across the doorway and grips the top of it w fingers. He hangs there like Jupiter might. The barrier was created by t Cephalopods from nemonium mesh. It's light and flexible, but Dev co never get through it, especially since he has nothing more dangerous ir room than a pillow and a roll of toilet paper.

'You need me, you know.'

I was anticipating a lot of things he might say, but that wasn't one o 'Do I?'

'You're going after them, aren't you? If you attack Land Institute, y need somebody who knows their campus, their security, their people.'

I stare at him, trying to find the Dev I used to know. 'You're offerin *help* us?'

'It's better than staying in here forever.' He shakes the grate. I've ne known him to be claustrophobic, but now I'm starting to wonder. He s

panicky, lost, scared. ‘Let’s cut a deal. I help you, you let me go. You -
you’ll never see me again, I swear.’

His words are crushing my heart, but I try not to show it. I shake my
‘No deal.’

‘Ana, please … I … What do you want? You let the others go. I can
in this box forever. You’re not that cruel.’

‘Maybe not. But you’ll have to do something else if you want your
freedom.’

He tilts his head, no doubt anticipating some kind of trap. ‘What?’

I wave at the security camera in the corridor. The grate slides open.

‘I have something to show you,’ I tell Dev. ‘Come on.’

He laughs incredulously. ‘You’ll just let me walk out of here?’

‘For the moment,’ I say.

‘Where are your guards?’

‘No guards,’ I say. ‘I asked everyone to stay clear. It’s just you and
raise an eyebrow. ‘If you want to try to overpower me, go ahead.’

Most animals, including humans, can sense fear. They can smell we
I am terrified, of course, but I guess I do a good enough job hiding it. I
steps over the threshold cautiously, as if I might attack *him*.

‘This way.’ I turn and lead him down the corridor.

My shoulder blades tingle. I can sense my brother glaring at my bac
thinking about different ways he could knock me unconscious and esca
I’m not at all certain he won’t try. But this is something I have to do. It
only work if I act like I’m completely in command – even if that’s not
feel.

We stop at the vault door that leads to the lagoon.

‘Go ahead.’ I gesture to the lock. ‘It’ll still respond to your DNA.’

His eyes glitter coldly. ‘Now I *know* this is a trick. You’re letting me
the *Nautilus*? What did you do, program the door to shock me? Teach
lesson?’

I feel so heavy and sad I can barely shake my head. ‘No tricks. No s
We’re not Land Institute, Dev. Neither are you.’

He frowns, then places his hand on the panel. The internal mechanis
click and release. The door swings open.

Inside the cavern, green metal dragonflies swirl lazily overhead. Do
the pier, in the multicoloured light of the phytoplankton clouds, the *Na*

glimmers like an alt-tech mirage. The bristles, wiring and complex qui of her hull no longer seem strange to me. She looks like home.

Dev inhales sharply. He's only ever seen the *Nautilus* underwater ar a distance, or as a glowing blip on the *Aronnax*'s readouts. Now, seein up close for the first time … Well, I remember how that felt.

'She's beautiful,' he murmurs. His tone is a mix of envy and wonde

Near our feet, Socrates breaks the surface of the water. He chatters furiously at Dev.

'Hey, buddy.' Dev's voice turns ragged. He crouches at the edge of pier.

Socrates continues to excoriate him.

Dev looks sheepishly at me. 'I can guess what he's saying.'

'He's not happy with you,' I agree.

Dev nods morosely. I trust him not to hurt Socrates, at least. Even if could convince himself to destroy our entire school, intentionally doin to someone who loves you, face-to-face … that's much harder. We are abstract things for Dev to hate. We're his family. I need him to see the difference, to *feel* it.

'I don't have anything for you, Socrates.' Dev's hollow expression r me suspect he doesn't just mean food. He means he doesn't have any explanations, or any apologies that would hold weight.

I open the nearest cabinet, pop Luca's ice chest and grab a frozen sq offer it to Dev.

He looks at the *Loligo opalescens* like it has fallen from another dimension. I imagine, like me, he's remembering the last time we stoo together, ready to feed Socrates.

He tosses the squid. Socrates snaps it up, because no matter how ang dolphin is, he will not turn down food. Socrates lets out another scathi tirade of dolphin insults, then turns tail to leave, splashing us both as h submerges.

Dev lowers his head. 'Okay. I get it. This is the punishment. The cel better.'

'No, Dev,' I say, my voice turning stern. 'We're not done. We're go inside the *Nautilus*.'

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CHAPTER SIXTY-THREE

Before we even reach the bottom of the staircase, Dev's hands are shal

He stands awestruck in the entry chamber, unsure where to focus his

I address the ship in Bundeli. '*Nautilus*, this is Dev. I told you about

The ship hums. The lights brighten.

Dev stares at me. At this point, I am pretty sure any thought he had a attacking me is gone. He's feeling too overwhelmed, too vulnerable.

'The ship is voice-controlled?' he asks. 'In Bundeli?'

'No, Dev,' I say calmly. 'She's not *controlled* at all. She's alive.'

'Alive …? No, that's not …'

The *Nautilus* shifts under our feet. A subtle message. *Listen to your boy.*

'Come,' I tell him.

He follows me to the bridge.

'My god …' He runs his hand over the back of the captain's chair. H gawps at the pipe organ, the great eye windows, the LOCUS orbs glow over the control consoles. 'Why are you letting me see this, Ana? Is th punishment?'

He sounds bitter, yes, but there's more to it. I think he's starting to r what he's lost … and it isn't just the *Nautilus*. It's HP. His own future. Maybe even me.

'I wanted you to meet her,' I say. 'And also to show you something. *Nautilus* has heard about you. You're a Dakkar. If you like, you can try give her an order.'

He looks at me sceptically, but his eyes gleam with desire.

‘*Nautilus*,’ he says at last. His Bundeli is rustier than mine, but he gi
try. ‘I’m Dev Dakkar. I … was supposed to be your captain. Will you
for me? Set depth at five metres.’

Nothing happens.

I think Dev expected this. His shoulders slump, nonetheless. ‘You’v
locked me out.’

‘No,’ I say. ‘The *Nautilus* just doesn’t trust you. You insulted her, tr
capture her.’

He frowns, dismayed. ‘Ana … I know the story. This ship killed our
parents.’

The bridge’s lighting turns a shade of violet.

‘This ship,’ I say, ‘was left sitting on the bottom of the lagoon for a
and a half. She was angry and only half-functioning. She lashed out. N
she’s grieving, just like we are.’

‘Grieving …’ Dev sounds like he’s trying to remember the word. ‘H
you really forgiven the ship?’

‘I’m working on it,’ I say, which is the truth. Dev and the *Nautilus* d
nothing less. With my eyes still locked on my brother, I give the ship a
command I’ve been avoiding since I first stepped on board. ‘*Nautilus*,
to the bottom of the lagoon, please. Show us the gardens.’

Immediately, the engines hum. The moorings retract. Water laps ove
great windows as we submerge.

We sink slowly, almost reverently, into the dark centre of the old vo

‘What are the gardens?’ Dev asks warily.

‘We’ll see,’ I tell him.

I walk to the prow and stare out of the windows. After some hesitati
Dev joins me.

We watch in silence until the *Nautilus* comes to a stop, hovering in t
deep. She switches on her forward lights. Before us stretches a seascap
thousand different marine plants: orchards of kelp that ripple orange in
submarine’s light, thick fields of purple moss, rows of bright-green sea
bushes. Some of the plants seem to be there only for decoration, dotted
strange flowers that could be anemones, or orchids, or something from
another planet, blooming in shades of violet and red.

Dev swallows. ‘It’s beautiful.’

‘The gardens are where our parents found the *Nautilus*,’ I say. ‘It’s a
where Luca and Ophelia scattered the ashes of the dead. Prince Dakkar

ives it a here. Mom and Dad, too.' I look at my brother. 'We never got to say g
dive properly. I thought you might want to. I know I do.'

The trembling becomes too much for him. He falls to his knees. He
to shake and cry, letting out years of anger and sorrow. I hope he's lett
e some of his bitterness, too. I remember a little boy dancing through the
botanical gardens with his sparkler on a summer evening. I remember
ied to parents sitting together, looking out contentedly over the sunflowers ar
blue eyes.

I can't trust Dev. I don't know if I'll ever be able to, but I do love hi
He's still my brother. Maybe he can start to realize what he has done, a
how far he needs to climb to come back to me. I have to be strong for l
century I was for my crew. I stand over him as he cries, and I watch the flower
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I say goodbye to my mother and father.

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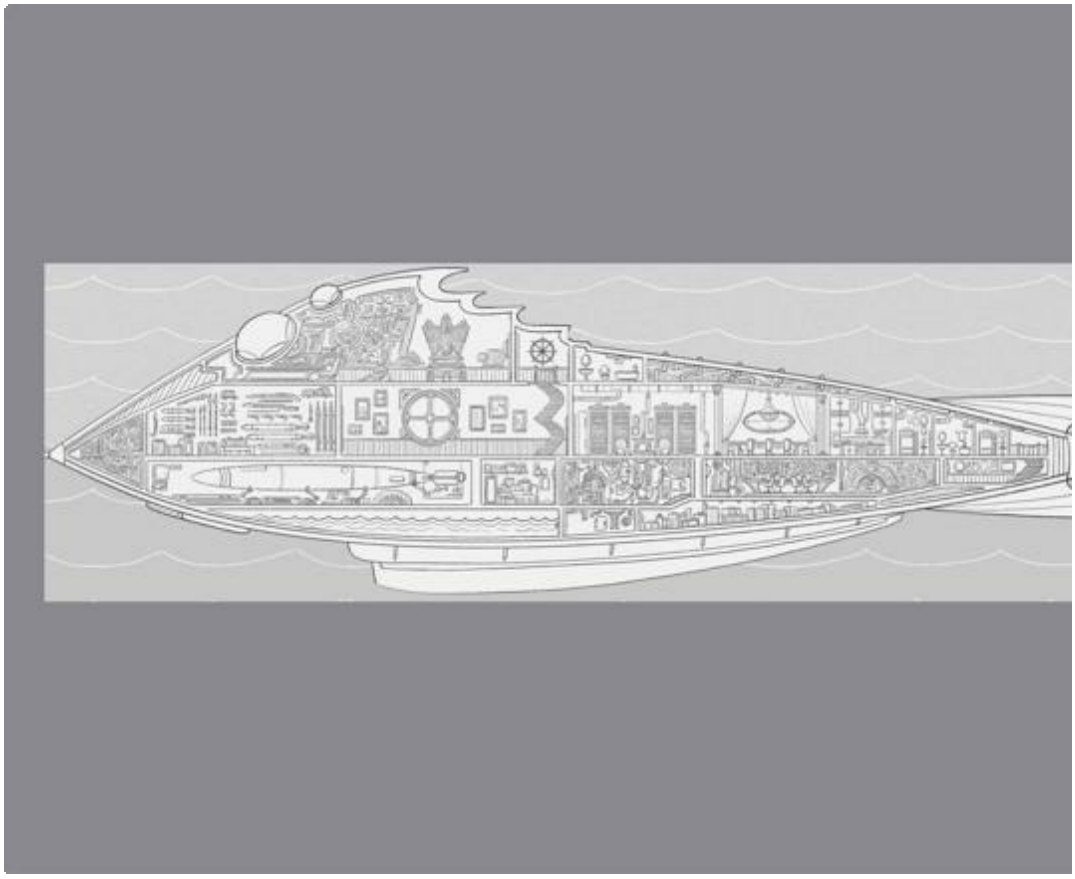
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I can't trust Dev. I don't know if I'll ever be able to, but I do love him. He's still my brother. Maybe he can start to realize what he has done, and how far he needs to climb to come back to me. I have to be strong for him, as I was for my crew. I stand over him as he cries, and I watch the flowers of the sea changing colour in the light of the *Nautilus*.

I say goodbye to my mother and father.

I say a prayer for my brother, and for the future. I will not give up on either of them.





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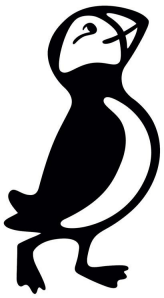
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